

## Chapter Thirty

### RETURNING TO WHAT WE ONCE KNEW

August 31, 1996

Harry

Delicate silver instruments stood atop spindle-legged tables, making all manner of noises and going about their business as though Harry hadn't smashed them in June. He remembered the sense of wonder he had felt upon first seeing Dumbledore's chambers; that feeling was gone now. It had seemed absent when he had helped Dumbledore return from Grimmauld Place – an event that seemed so long ago now – and there was no doubt this time. Harry simply felt empty; he drew the same hollowness from the whole of Hogwarts. He was an intruder.

The portraits were mostly present but chose to silently regard him; he had heard nothing save the puffing and whirring from the instruments since a house-elf he hadn't known had ushered him in. A line of ghostly orange penetrated the grey eastern horizon and cast long shadows through the windows.

Phineas Nigellus broke the silence. "You are early, Mister Potter. Dumbledore has not yet returned from abroad."

"Abroad?" Harry asked. When there was no reply, he said, "I'll wait here."

Phineas raised an eyebrow. "It is unlikely that he will come prior to your scheduled meeting. Go raise mischief elsewhere, Mister Potter – take breakfast in the Great Hall; prepare a gazetteer of the broom closets; visit Dumbledore's great pet, that fellow who keeps the grounds..." Harry bristled, but held his tongue.

"You are not welcome here in the Headmaster's absence," sniffed a portrait that Harry didn't recognise; the comment drew sharp looks from several peers.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Harry's voice was suddenly loud and strong. "Apparently the house-elves don't agree."

"Impudence!" the unfamiliar portrait hissed.

Harry glared at the entire wall of faces, and walked behind Dumbledore's desk. There was a scattering of whispers and there were a few grumbles, and he ignored all of it. Snatching up a bottle of ink and a quill, he dashed a note to the Headmaster on a stray scrap of parchment.

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I arrived early. Phineas told me that you will not be here until our nine-o'clock meeting. I will be on the grounds, if you want to find me prior.

Harry

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As soon as the ink was stoppered and the quill properly cleaned, he left the room without a word and wandered the quiet halls for a second time. The eyes of the portraits along the way all seemed to watch him as though they knew something – something profoundly sad.

"Hem, hem," a woman's voice sounded. Harry's wand was in his hand and he faced toward the sound before he was fully aware that he'd moved.

"I was only wondering whether you wanted inside, Mr. Potter!" the Fat Lady squealed.

Harry slowly lowered his wand. "I'm sorry... I thought..." he mumbled.

The Fat Lady gave him the same look as he'd seen again and again from the portraits outside the Headmaster's chambers. "Mr. Potter, you needn't draw your wand; you merely need ask me for entry."

"I don't have a password," Harry admitted.

The Fat Lady smiled warmly, in the way he remembered Mrs. Weasley in years past. "Firstly, there are no student passwords to give until the morrow. Secondly, we have been told to give you the run of the castle just as we give to the professors." She bore herself up proudly. "Thirdly... once a true Gryffindor, always a true Gryffindor."

Harry smiled faintly. "Thank you," he said. "May I?" The Fat Lady nodded proudly and the entry to the Gryffindor common room opened before him. He heard a faint voice trailing down the stairs from the girls' dormitories, and quickly Disillusioned himself before he tried Shacklebolt's jumping spell. In one hop, he found himself several steps above the common room floor. He waited, but the stairs did not flatten and he did not slide. What am I doing? he asked himself. It's probably just McGonagall... or Filch. He had to admit that the thought of unexpectedly greeting Filch was rather delicious.

"...yes, the entire castle possesses a certain charm... indeed, it is easy to lose sight of that... here, I believe... perhaps she made some sort of permanent marking?... if you say so, but in my experience..." It was Dumbledore's voice. Harry quieted his feet, and moved steadily up the stairs. The door marked for the sixth year girls was ajar.

"This isn't so different from Smithson Hall, honestly; much older, of course, but not so different." Hearing Mrs. Granger's voice made the hair on Harry's neck stand on end.

"Excuse me for a moment, would you?" Dumbledore said. The door slowly opened, and the Headmaster peered into the stairwell. "Please join us, Harry. I had thought that we would not see you until later this morning."

Harry looked down slowly, to find that he was no longer Disillusioned. There was no sign of a wand in Dumbledore's hands, but the Headmaster was regarding him with twinkling eyes and a frustrating smile. Merlin, I have a lot to learn, he thought.

Mrs. Granger stood just inside the door, arms crossed and brow worried. Mr. Granger was looking out a window with obvious purpose. Both wore rather large and elaborate pendants; Harry wondered if they allowed Muggles to see the castle. There was no sign of Hermione. Harry thrust his hands into his pockets. "Erm... good morning, ma'am," he croaked.

"Good morning, Harry," Mrs. Granger said with a very firm tone that caused his shoulders to inch higher.

"The Grangers were interested in seeing where their daughter spends her time. We first visited the library, of course," Dumbledore said lightly. "In addition, they require your assistance; they have reluctantly taken the decision to conceal themselves from the wizarding world."

Harry took in a sharp breath. Conceal them? Did Dumbledore mean... "The Fidelius charm?" he asked. Dumbledore nodded slightly, and Harry felt a chill at the thought. Mr. Granger turned from the window to face him; his expression was too much like that of the Fat Lady for Harry's liking.

He wondered where Hermione was and why she wasn't with her parents. "And Hermione? She...?" Harry managed to say.

Mr. Granger responded with clear discomfort, "She will be staying here."

"With you," Mrs. Granger added; she seemed even less comfortable with the idea.

"I see," Harry said. A small part of him wished that Hermione would simply go with them, but the rest felt a flicker of satisfaction that he consciously held from his face – at the very least, she was well enough to return. He couldn't seem to evade Mr. Granger's gaze. "Erm... thank you for the picture. I never said thank you," he offered.

Mrs. Granger's brow beetled, but Mr. Granger said, "You're welcome, Harry. I meant what I said that day."

Harry thrust his hands into his pockets, and tried to think of the right thing to say under the circumstances. "It's the right decision, I think. If you went back to your home, you wouldn't be safe," he offered.

Mr. Granger's face tightened. "We've been left with little choice."

"You certainly couldn't have a better Secret Keeper than Professor Dumbledore. I can't imagine how anyone could ever get him to..." Harry stopped as the Grangers scowled simultaneously. "I'm sorry... did I say something wrong?"

"A word, Mr. Dumbledore?" Mrs. Granger snapped, and inclined her head toward the door to the stairs.

Harry's jaw dropped as he realised what was happening. He held up a hand to stop the Headmaster and Mrs. Granger, and took an unsteady breath. "Me? Wait... you want me to be your Secret Keeper? Are you...?"

"Distrustful of him?" Mr. Granger asked, pointing harshly at Dumbledore. "Yes, absolutely."

Mrs. Granger glared at Mr. Granger, who returned the look full-force. "Mr. Dumbledore told us that the effectiveness of this bit of magic is connected to the strength of the person who puts it into effect," she explained.

"We wouldn't have believed him, but Hermione and McGonagall and Dr. Covelli all said the same," Mr. Granger cut in.

Harry turned to Dumbledore, puzzled. "Who's Dr. Covelli?"

"They refer to a new member of the Hogwarts staff," Dumbledore returned. "You will meet her within the week."

Mrs. Granger looked at Harry, but her eyes quickly fell to the floor. "I don't think there's any doubt that you're a powerful young man, not after what we've seen," she said.

Harry said nothing for a while; he let the implications of what had been said churn in his mind. The Grangers waited expectantly. Dumbledore closed his eyes; he appeared tired. When Harry spoke at last, he was slow and measured. "First, I'm not as powerful as the Headmaster. For that matter, I'm not as –"

"It won't be him; that is not acceptable," Mr. Granger said harshly.

Without looking, Dumbledore said, "You really must stop underestimating yourself, Harry. You are as powerful as you wish to be."

"Second, I should think this rules me out," Harry sneered and jabbed roughly at his scar.

Dumbledore's eyes remained closed. "When properly cast, the Fidelius charm buries the secret very deeply within the Secret Keeper's mind. Voldemort would have to invade your mind sufficient to take possession of you, Harry. I doubt that he would again subject himself to the injury that would accompany such an invasion, not after his experience at the Department of Mysteries. In addition, I expect that your barriers to intrusion would be heightened by the knowledge that you hold a secret of this nature."

Harry clenched his jaw at the last; there was no doubt that Dumbledore was preying upon him. He forced himself to let the rush of anger fade away. The nearest bed rattled and shook for a moment, and then stilled itself. "It requires a strong wizard? Before I'll agree to this, you'll have to explain why Wormtail was ever allowed to be my mum and dad's Secret Keeper," he said coldly.

Dumbledore's eyes snapped open. "If Sirius related the circumstances to you, then you should have your answer. However, I will provide you with an explanation if you still wish it," he said.

Harry was acutely aware of the feel of his wand in his sleeve. "I don't know the charm," he said very quietly.

"The Fidelius charm is quite simple to cast, deceptively so," Dumbledore said. "The success and the strength lie in the power applied and the intent within the wizard."

Harry couldn't help but think of what had happened to his parents. "Then... when Wormtail cast Fidelius... he wasn't strong, his intentions were bad..." His throat tightened. "It could have been broken, couldn't it? A strong wizard could have broken it."

"Even if Peter hadn't directly betrayed your parents, it is possible that they might have been found out by determined Death Eaters," Dumbledore said sadly. "This would not have been the case if Sirius had cast the charm. Sirius and your father made a terrible miscalculation. It was doubtless one of the moments that the Dementors drew upon when they were in Sirius' presence."

Harry tried to summon a happy thought, and failed. "I'd... I'd rather not talk about Sirius."

Mr. Granger cleared his throat. "Harry, it sounds as if you have to want this. We can find another way."

Harry shook his head. "What I want is for all three of you to be safe, for everyone to be safe."

"I have asked the Grangers to remain sequestered in my quarters for a brief time, a few days at most; it is not possible to give proper attention to the charm until after the start of term," Dumbledore said.

Dumbledore's posture made it clear that the conversation was at an end. "In your office at nine-o'clock, then?" Harry asked.

"I look forward to it," Dumbledore returned.

Mr. Granger motioned for Harry to stop. "Harry... would it be possible for you to join Cordelia and me for dinner this evening?" he asked.

Harry looked nervously to Dumbledore, who merely regarded him with sparkling eyes. "Erm... uh... apparently it is?" he advanced.

“Dinner will be served at half past six in my quarters, Harry,” Dumbledore said merrily. “I shall be otherwise engaged this evening, but the house-elves prepare a magnificent table.”

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Hermione

It was grey and drizzling in London, but the window to room eleven at the Leaky Cauldron was open. Hermione wanted to hear the din of the minibuses and lorries from the street below. She didn't mind the coolness after nearly a month in the Italian heat, and she figured that there was no avoiding the damp. It was a nice enough room, not as large as her quarters at Dr. Covelli's villa but nearly the size of her bedroom at home – or what was once her home, at any rate. The room was reasonably well appointed; but for the lack of electric lights, she could have been in any number of older lodgings throughout England.

She looked in the mirror above the basin and scowled. Her hair was disastrous. In the warm trade winds, it had been vibrant and free. In the cool damp, it clumped and clung to her head. In Italy, it made her feel like she had a life of her own. In London, it made her look like her mother. She idly reached up to tuck her fringe behind her ear out of habit, but there was no longer anything to tuck.

“You should save that scowl for your hairdresser, dear,” the mirror said cattily.

Someone rapped sharply at the door, in the appointed pattern. Hermione faced the door warily and gave the correct response. “Enter at your own risk,” she said.

A vaguely familiar-looking woman with long dark hair slipped into the room. “Wotcher, Herm –” she began, before she froze in place and goggled.

“It's lovely to see you as well, Tonks,” Hermione huffed.



Tonks slowly advanced, as though she were examining a strange and undiscovered creature. “Your hair... it’s... it’s short... and flat...”

“I’m overwhelmed by your powers of observation,” Hermione said dryly.

“It’s all wrong,” Tonks said. She circled Hermione quickly, regarding her with a critical eye. “Your hair’s too thick to be cut that way. I hate to say this, but... well; it looks like you have a wet Kneazle atop your head.” Hermione glared at her, but she merely smiled and went on, “I should know; I’ve had it all – thick hair, thin hair, long hair, short hair, old hair, young hair, braids, pigtails, bobs...”

“Tonks!” Hermione snarled.

Tonks shrugged. “What? It’s the truth. You’re in need of Miranda Elspeth.”

“Who’s Miranda Elspeth?” Hermione asked.

Tonks eyes bulged. “Who’s...?” She started to laugh, but stopped when it apparently dawned on her that Hermione was asking a legitimate question. “Cor, you’re serious! Hermione, you’re the only witch I know under the age of one hundred who could ask that and mean it... well, there is McGonagall, I suppose...”

“I gather that this person cuts hair?” Hermione snapped.

“Cuts hair, you say? Miranda isn’t some menace with a wand and a pair of charmed shears! She’s a personal stylist,” Tonks announced with put-on airs; she managed to hold a serious expression for a few moments.

“I have no idea what that means,” Hermione said flatly. She looked to the mirror, and feared that she might prefer the devil she knew to anything Tonks might conjure up. “I don’t want to offend you; it’s just... you wouldn’t be the first person I’d think of in terms of style.”

Tonks let out a barking laugh. “What, did you think I was going to point out something pink and spiky?” Her eyes screwed up in

concentration; within a few moments, she appeared to be Hermione from the neck upward. "I had something rather like this in mind." She looked into the mirror, and her hair reshaped itself; it took on a fringe and fuller sides, though it still didn't reach her collarbones. She smiled with satisfaction. "What do you think?"

Hermione nearly spoke several times before she managed, "It wouldn't look like that on me."

"You're selling yourself a bit short, dear," the mirror said kindly.

Tonks continued to smile. "More than a bit, I'd say. So... how is it, then?"

"It does look better," Hermione admitted, "but my hair would have to grow out. Perhaps you could take me to see this Elspeth woman over Christmas? I... I'm sure I can do something with this mess for a while."

"I doubt any ordinary person could arrange an appointment with Miranda on only four months' notice. Of course you're with me, which means you jump the queue." Tonks shot Hermione a playful smirk. "Now, as for growing out your hair... you are a witch, aren't you? All you need is a spot of Hair Restoring Potion and you'll be right as rain."

Hermione returned Tonks' smirk with a dubious stare before facing the mirror again. She huffed at her reflection and reached for a cloak – a hooded cloak. "I'm not letting this woman do anything that requires more than two minutes' extra care each morning," she insisted. The hood fit low and tight on her head.

"You'll love it," Tonks promised. Her wand moved about in a complicated wave, and which provoked another knock at the door. "Kirley rocks!" she squealed in response. Hermione rolled her eyes.

Hestia Jones entered, closed the door, and laughed. "You're incorrigible, Tonks." She took Hermione's hand warmly, and began, "I don't know if you remember me..."

"I remember you, ma'am," Hermione acknowledged, and hoped that there would be no discussion of the attack.

"Please, it's just Hestia. How have you been getting along, since all that business?" Jones asked.

Hermione sighed. "I'm getting along."

Jones nodded silently for a few moments. Hermione willed the woman to look for a way to end the conversation; it didn't work. "Back to your studies tomorrow, then? What are you, a seventh year?"

"Sixth year," Hermione returned.

"It's a bit gloomy, I know, but I doubt you'll be needing that hood," Jones offered after more silence.

Tonks grinned wickedly. "Hermione's hair is misbehaving, so I promised that we'd have it suitably punished."

Jones laughed. "I'm game; we're off to the Alley now?" she asked with the sort of false cheer that Hermione associated with trips to the Hospital Wing.

"Apparently so," Hermione said. There was hesitation in her voice, but neither of the women seemed to hear it.

It seemed as though every wizard and witch in England had descended upon Diagon Alley at once; Hermione couldn't recall ever seeing such crowds there. She drew her hands inside of her cloak, where she could dig her nails into her palms without anyone taking notice. With each rustle of a long black cloak, her stomach tightened. She took in a nervous breath when the intersection of Knockturn Alley came into view and didn't release it until they were well past. A well-dressed man with long slicked blonde hair burst forth from the apothecary, and Hermione clutched at Tonks' arm.

Tonks' head jerked around and she nearly lost her footing. She looked Hermione up and down, and flashed Hestia Jones a quick hand signal. Jones shifted subtly, and literally watched their backs as

Tonks guided Hermione to a surprisingly secluded spot between two storefronts and quickly cast silencing and concealment charms.

Hermione looked away. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to do that."

"That fellow looked a bit like Lucius Malfoy for a moment, didn't he?" Tonks sighed. "Look... it wasn't hard to see that you were in a bad way, afterward... If you need to talk, or you just want someone to listen..."

Even through the haze of the charms, the bustle of the alley felt overwhelming to Hermione. "Thank you," she managed, "but could we simply get to wherever it is you're taking me?"

Two hours later Hermione found herself thrust back into the crowd and flanked by Tonks and Hestia Jones, her hood now lowered. Tonks had been right about Miranda Elspeth, who was apparently a school friend of Mrs. Tonks. However, Tonks' special abilities and not her parentage had earned favours; on occasion, she had apparently modelled hairstyles for Elspeth.

Hermione's hair was still short, as she had settled upon, but it was fuller and lighter now – much more as it had appeared in Italy, though a touch longer. Tonks burred about the style so incessantly that Hermione simply stopped listening. Eventually they budged their way into the throngs that filled Flourish and Blotts and Hermione relaxed somewhat; she was in her element.

Someone nearly jostled her into a large placard set next to the service desk. Tonks let forth a stinging upbraid to the poor unfortunate wizard who had pushed Hermione, and drew a few looks that Hermione would have preferred to avoid. She looked to see if she could slip behind the placard or beside the desk, but stopped dead before it as her eyes took in the bright blue words.

GILDEROY LOCKHART

will be signing copies of his new memoir

JOINED-UP LETTERS:

## Rediscovering the Real Me and How the Wizarding World Should Be

Today 11:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M.

It was only then that she noticed the usual crowd of anxious students and parents had been joined by a large number of witches roughly the age of her parents and a fair number of similarly aged wizards as well. There wasn't the near-mania she recalled from her first encounter with Lockhart, four years prior; instead, people seemed to flow toward the back of the shop in orderly fashion. She couldn't resist sneaking a look though she certainly hadn't the faintest genuine interest in the man, not after what he'd nearly done to Harry and Ron.

Lockhart was seated at a table surrounded by pictures of the jacket to his new book. His face didn't dominate the jacket this time; Lockhart's small image in the lower corner gave only the barest hint of his unnaturally white teeth. His robes followed suit, muted but stylish grey checks instead of the brilliant forget-me-not blue that had been calculated to match his eyes. He had a pleasant look on his face, but a serious one. Hermione wondered how in Merlin's name Lockhart had recovered his memory, and what had possessed him to change his image.

A photographer moved about the crowd, taking pictures of Lockhart shaking hands with readers and well-wishers. Occasionally the brilliant smile came out from hiding. Brilliant flashes lit the room, and purple smoke wafted amidst the rafters. "Mr. Lockhart, look this way please!" the photographer called out. "Let me through, please... Daily Prophet... Mr. Lockhart, here please!"

Hermione hefted a copy of Lockhart's new book, and paged through the contents and the author's notes, which she hadn't expected to find. On first glance, it appeared to be a book of some substance. I wonder who wrote it for him? she mused. The crowd lurched to one side as the photographer moved in her direction. Lockhart released the hand of an autograph seeker and came to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, waving his hands. "Thank you for coming today. As has been detailed extensively in the Daily Prophet's

recently completed five-part series, I have spent the last three years recovering at St. Mungo's from grievous injuries. My memory was severely damaged as a result of a Basilisk attack that also wounded one of the wizarding world's other well-known figures – the one who has caused me to finish second in the polling for Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award this year, as I understand it – Harry Potter.” Knowing laughter echoed from the assembled crowd. Hermione thought that Lockhart's eyes flashed for a moment as he went on. “In my book, Joined-Up Letters, I describe how I went from having no memory at all to rediscovering everything as well as reaching a new understanding of...”

Hermione stopped hearing Lockhart and her blood ran cold. How much does he remember? she wondered. If he truly recalls everything... One page after another turned as she tore through the book, looking for the description of events. As Lockhart told it, he and Harry had battled a basilisk deep beneath Hogwarts. They had saved two students, according to the book, before Harry was injured and Lockhart was struck by his own rebounded spell. Neither Ginny nor Ron was mentioned by name, much to her relief, but she couldn't fathom why Lockhart had actually taken responsibility for his own injury – even if he was still embellishing.

She was jostled again, and lost her grip on the book. It struck the floor with an audible thump. “Pardon me... are you Hermione Granger?” someone called. Without thinking, she turned to face the unknown voice. A brilliant flash flooded her eyes and purplish smoke tickled her nose.

By the time Hermione blinked back tears from the light, the photographer lay on his back and his camera was slowly contracting into a ball. “Ask permission next time,” Tonks growled. The crowd formed a restless circle around the fallen photographer, the enraged auror and Hermione. Hestia Jones stood in the first row of the circle but dispensed as many deadly stares as did Tonks.

Hermione shrunk back against Tonks. She felt as exposed as in her worst dreams, and desperately hoped that either Tonks or Jones would move to spirit her from the room. The crowd stirred, and then parted to her right.

“Good morning, Miss Granger,” Lockhart said. “My, but this is an unexpected pleasure.” He flashed his famous smile, which did nothing whatsoever to put Hermione at ease.

Jones stepped out from the crowd. “We have matters in hand, Lockhart,” she snapped.

“You are familiar to me...” Lockhart murmured.

Jones scowled at him. “How I wish that weren’t true.”

The pieces of the puzzle appeared to fall into place; Lockhart laughed nervously. “I apologise, cousin; my memories are still hazy at times.”

Jones was cold as ice. “Tell it to Emmeline or someone else who’s interested in your wares, Gilderoy.”

“All in good time, cousin Hestia, all in good time,” Lockhart said with a lightness that was almost jarring. He turned to Hermione, and the smile broadened. “How do you fare, my dear girl? I’m sure everyone here is interested to know the answer. Very few people face the Dark Lord and his minions and return to tell the tale, after all.

Before she could say anything, he made a flamboyant whirl to face the breadth of the crowd and said, “This poor young lady’s experience goes directly to my points about the state of wizarding in England today, which are detailed in my new book, *Joined-Up Letters*. How is it that she and others like her continue to face random violence?”

Hermione snapped, “Random?” but no one save Tonks appeared to hear.

“The Dark Lord was absent for more than a decade,” Lockhart blathered on, “yet he was able to return to a powerful position quite rapidly. What could possibly cause today’s young witches and wizards to join with the Dark Lord? The answer is quite simple, actually.” He took a pause clearly intended for effect, and Hermione had to bite on the side of her hand to remain quiet. “The wizarding

world is under assault, good people. The age-old traditions that formed the glue for our way of life have disappeared or have gone to ground. We have forgotten who we are.”

Hermione could hold her tongue no longer. “Thus, all the Muggle-borns attacked in recent days were responsible for their own attacks – is that your point, sir?”

Lockhart turned slightly to face her – not so much as to put his back to the bulk of his audience, Hermione noted. “We are all responsible – not just us, but also those who came before. Those born of wizards and witches thwart the efforts of newcomers to enter into our society.” He gave her a pointed look. “Those born outside of our world deride wizarding ways and seek to impose their world upon all of us. Centuries pass, all of us become more firm in our positions, and we find ourselves clinging to Dark Lords on the one hand and mad prophets like Keith MacLeish on the other.”

“Societies are always influenced by newcomers,” Hermione returned stridently. “The Ministry must be a direct product of that, sir. The civil service arose in England long after the wizarding world broke with the Muggles. If not for Muggle-born influence, there would be no Ministry at all.”

Lockhart smiled. “I see that someone has been sleeping through Professor Binns’ classes,” he said waggishly. “Not to fear, Miss Granger; that puts you in excellent company. It’s true that the Ministry has been reshaped over time to reflect its Muggle counterpart, but there was a Minister for Magic well before ties were severed. In this case, it seems that they were influenced by us.” With a flourish, he returned his full attention to the crowd. “This is the sort of exchange we badly need, ladies and gentlewizards. We are under siege both from outside and from within. We cannot and should not rob ourselves of what the best among our newcomers may bring – one need only look to the young lady behind me to see that there is value to be found. However, we cannot tear down a thousand years of wizarding culture over one conflict, however serious it may be. It is time for us to all rediscover ourselves and our purposes.” The trademark smile burst forth. “To that end, I am pleased to announce that I shall be resuming my role as chief spokeswizard for the Dark



Forces Defence League, as well as assistant director. The League is committed to standing against violence and standing for wizards and witches everywhere.”

As soon as he stopped speaking, the crowd began to applaud. Lockhart continued to smile as he retrieved the book at Hermione’s feet. “I believe you dropped this,” he said. Before she could answer, he drew a quill from somewhere and dashed off something inside the front cover. “With my compliments,” he added, and placed the book in Hermione’s hands.

“Thank you,” she said, almost as a reflex.

Lockhart bowed slightly. His smile faded, and he said in a near whisper, “Pass along my respects to your little friends, especially the redheaded one.” He was seated at the table again and jovially signing books before Hermione could breathe.

Tonks planted a hand on her shoulder. “Hermione, I am so sorry. I overreacted to the photographer, and ended up drawing more attention.”

Hermione shivered. “Here’s my booklist. Please, let’s just pick these up and go.”

Tonks stiffened. “What did he say to you?”

“I just want to fetch my books and go, Tonks,” Hermione said. “Please leave it alone.”

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Harry

Madam Rosmerta seemed possessed of a permanent smile, and Harry decided that he could easily become accustomed to that. “I can’t believe that you’re old enough to let rooms from me, Harry,” she said, with a shake of her head. “Well, I suppose that you aren’t old enough, really; you know what I meant.”

"It's been an odd summer," Harry allowed.

She filled a glass with pumpkin juice and slid it across the bar top to him. "Obviously, I'm thrilled to have you lodge here."

The Three Broomsticks was empty excepting the two of them, but Harry lowered his voice all the same. "I'm not the... safest sort you could take in, you know."

Rosmerta's smile dimmed. "There's trouble in the wind. You could lock yourself in the castle, and trouble would still find us."

"If you'd prefer that I slip in and out of the back..." Harry offered.

"Nonsense," Rosmerta insisted. "Hogsmeade is a small place, Harry; there's no hiding you here." She added with a laugh, "If you're going to bring trouble, then I may as well profit from it."

Harry swallowed uneasily. "I'd understand if you wanted, I don't know, something extra for the trouble?"

Rosmerta's eyebrows shot up. "I was poking fun!" She reached out and set her hand atop his. "I was fond of your parents, and your parents' friends. How... how is Remus faring?"

Harry looked to the front doors. "I wouldn't know," he said flatly.

"Oh," Rosmerta said quietly.

Harry broke the silence. "I have another meeting at the castle... could I see the room?"

Rosmerta's smile returned. "It's rather more than a room. You don't mind being up in the garret, I hope? You're a young buck, so the stairs shouldn't trouble you." Her smile became more of a smirk. "Besides, it has its own way in and out and it faces the rear... if you were of a mind to be slipping in and out, of course."

"That might present a challenge," Harry sighed.

Rosmerta laughed. "I suppose it might, with the new Defence professor lodging under the same roof."

Harry sat up straighter. "Marcus Detheridge?"

"You know him, then?" Rosmerta asked.

"Not yet, no," Harry said.

"You needn't concern yourself, Harry," Rosmerta told him. "His references are sterling, and that's understating it. He's the sort of fellow you want to hoist a pint with, eh? The man does keep some odd hours, I'll grant you."

Harry gestured toward the doors. "I'm not worried about Professor Detheridge," he said glumly, "it's the lot outside that's keeping watch."

"Keeping watch... what's this?" Rosmerta ambled to the front window and peered out. "I'll be switched! Let's see, there are... two... three... is that Mad-Eye Moody?"

Harry stood behind her. "That's Moody. Over there, that's Mundungus Fletcher —"

Rosmerta spun around angrily. "'Dung Fletcher? Is this Dumbledore's doing?" Harry nodded quickly, and she railed on, "I'll be talking to him, if he thinks that conniving thief is coming with shouting distance of my establishment! He's banned, has been for years!" She stopped abruptly, and her expression darkened. "Mad-Eye Moody and 'Dung Fletcher, together? That brings back old times... times I'd rather not see return." Harry said nothing; he preferred that she drew her own conclusions. It sounded as though she had at least a passing acquaintance with the 'old crowd'.

She collected herself, and extended a hand to Harry. "Shall we go up?"

At the top of the first flight, there were four doors down a long hallway. "Those are the single rooms," Rosmerta explained. "Professor

Detheridge took two of the four for the year. I offered him the flat, but he said that he preferred two rooms.”

Harry wondered why Detheridge had foregone quarters in the castle, but the thought left his mind as Rosmerta opened the door at the top of the second flight. The flat ran the entire length of the garret; it was more spacious than the bothy. The door opened into a living area with two dormer windows. There was a genuine kitchen, but it was a wizarding kitchen; Harry made a mental note to have Dobby teach him how to use the appliances. The bath and water closet were small, but there were two bedrooms – a larger one at the end with a large window, and a smaller room against the bath.

Except for the small bedroom, there was a window in every room. He could access the concealed side stairs from the larger bedroom – his bedroom. The flat did face the rear, but it also faced the street. He could see the lake from the living area, and he could see the rest of Hogsmeade from his bedroom. Having Detheridge immediately below him was less than thrilling; it meant that he’d have to work on his popping – both to reduce the noise and to keep from strewing half of the flat across the meadow behind the building. On the whole, it certainly seemed to meet his needs.

“Perfect,” he said. “Did Mr. Tonks – ?”

“He returned the papers this morning,” Rosmerta said. “We’ll just charm your keys and you can be on your way.”

“Erm... about the money...?” he began.

Rosmerta frowned. “I was serious about one galleon for the year, Harry. That’s very far from what Ted Tonks returned, very far indeed.”

“That was really kind of you, Madam Rosmerta, but I can pay,” Harry insisted.

She seemed to look right through him for a moment. “It’s not about you, Harry... it’s out of respect for your mum and dad.”

Harry didn't know what to say in return. He supposed that much of the concern shown him by adults owed to his parents, but few people ever said that aloud. "I think... I think they'd be pleased to see me paying my own way," he offered.

Rosmerta seemed to deflate; she leant heavily against the dining table. "I wish they could see that, Harry; they were good people, the best," she said quietly. Harry wondered just how well she had known his parents. He signed the Gringotts draft Mr. Tonks had sent to cover the first two months' expense.

She set it aside. He moved to shake her extended hand, and she pulled him into a warm embrace. He stiffened for a moment, but accepted it. "Welcome, Harry. I hope you're at home here," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione

Tonks muttered into her ear. "If you're certain you don't want to be seen, it's best you keep moving, maybe even put up the hood."

Hermione followed her eyes to the absurd storefront for Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes; the twins certainly appeared to be doing well, if the stream of people in and out the doors was any indication. She looked nervously from side to side for evidence of red hair; seeing none, her pace toward the Leaky Cauldron quickened. There were people everywhere, all pressing in at her. Not yet, she told herself. Tomorrow I can do this, but not yet.

"I don't know if I can keep up," panted Fred Weasley in Hermione's left ear.

"It's times like this when I realise we're not playing Quidditch anymore," George Weasley added in her right ear. Hermione hadn't heard a hint of a pop and she shrieked, which caused an untold number of bystanders to turn and look.

She was surrounded by a blur of movement. When it stopped, Fred stood very stiffly and quietly in front of Tonks. George was in similar

shape, and Hestia Jones' arm was around his waist in a way that would seem friendly to a casual passer-by. "Not funny, boys – not at all," Tonks said in a low voice.

Fred's head relaxed, but he remained still with his arms tight to his sides. "Didn't see you there, my darling Nymph," he said. "We were too busy trying to check out... er... I mean... you know..."

Tonks' hair flickered as red as her cheeks. "'Nymph'? Remember, little boy, I know what's behind some of your latest creations –"

"Oi, it was a joke! Joking!" Fred squeaked.

Hestia Jones smirked at George. "Just exactly what were you... what was that? 'Checking out'?"

George's ears flushed. "Erm... the thing is, we, uh, saw Hermione here... didn't know it was her at first..." He gave Hermione a pleading look. "We wouldn't have been bird-watching if we'd known it was you, honest!"

"Is that so?" Hermione ground her teeth, something that would have sent both her parents into hysterics. For his part, George appeared to be seeking an escape route.

"We swear it!" Fred insisted. "When we figured out it was you – smashing hair, by the way – we had to pop over straight away! Friend to our sister and brother –"

"More importantly, friend to our business partner –" George chimed in quickly.

"A sheer genius with Charms and Transfiguration and... well, just about everything, really –" Fred added.

"Don't forget... she surely trod all over dear Percy's pompous arse on the OWLs –" George noted.

“Percy?” Fred protested. “She surely trod over Bill’s arse.” He smirked at Tonks. “Course, you’d rather be the one doing the trodding there.” Tonks promptly smacked him atop the head.

“I don’t know anything about my OWLs,” Hermione said. In truth, she hadn’t thought about them, not even when the Headmaster had mentioned preparation for her NEWTs. “I never received my scores,” she added, suddenly very perplexed.

Hestia Jones scowled. She let go of George, who nearly fell before she released the bind that held him still. “That’s dodgy,” she said. “Those scores should have gone out weeks ago.”

“Perhaps they couldn’t find me,” Hermione said quietly. Given that she’d seen Professor Dumbledore a number of times, that explanation seemed out of order. Only then did it dawn on her that Professor McGonagall had provided her a booklist without a course registration.

“Let’s keep moving,” Tonks said with a casual air. “With those jackets of yours, we might as well wear advertisements.” There was nothing casual about the way her eyes swept the crowds flowing up and down the alley.

Fred let out a deep breath as his arms came free. Hermione noticed that both of the twins were also watching the surroundings; they were simply good at hiding it. She felt a rush of nervousness, and began looking herself for dark robes and blond hair and silver hands.

George put his hand atop her shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her cloak. “Sorry,” he said awkwardly.

“Okay,” she managed.

Tonks caught her eye. “I’ll fetch the rest of your list. Can you lot manage the last hundred feet or so?” The twins grumbled at her.

Hermione hadn’t noticed how close they had come to the wall. Both George and Fred followed her through the portal and into the Leaky Cauldron, with Hestia Jones close at their heels; Fred said something

about waiting on a delivery. The dining hall bustled with patrons, and the twins weren't hesitant to clear a path. She drew curious looks; apparently some of the crowd from Flourish and Blotts had beaten them down the alley.

"Well, well, look who's here!" Fred shouted out. Dashing through the crowded room from the direction of the Floo were Ron, Ginny, Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Weasley.

Hermione felt the room closing in. "I can't," she gasped.

George looked at her curiously. "Hermione?"

She saw Mrs. Weasley's face, and her shoulders rose. "I just can't," she cried, and took a step backward.

George's expression softened and she cringed inside – not pity; anything but that, she thought. "Oi, Fred! Play Keeper for a minute, right?" he called out without glancing away from her. She felt herself being drawn by the hand back through the crowd to the stairs that led up to the rooming house. Waves of fear and anger and self-loathing pulsed through her until she could barely keep her feet.

George gripped her by the shoulders, and pushed his face toward hers. "Hermione? You in there?" She managed to nod but couldn't speak; her throat was too tight. He guided her up the stairs and down the corridor until she stopped before number eleven.

"I'm sorry, I just... I can't..." she said weakly.

George's voice was low and calm. "No worries. Look..." He seemed to struggle for a few moments. "Been enough nightmares to go around the last few weeks, eh?"

"More than enough," she said hoarsely.

George sighed. "You're all lucky to be alive, you know. Fred, Dad, Mum, Bill, Ron, Ginny, Harry... it would have been just me and Charlie... and Percy, the bloody ponce. The thing of it is, you're one of us – you and Harry both. Don't ever forget that."



Hermione let out a half-sob and half-snort. "I... I sent your mum a Howler," she choked out.

"You... what? Bloody hell... a Howler? Honestly? Wish I'd been there for that..." George's laughter subsided. "No one's said anything, and believe me, we'd have heard. Are you sure?"

Hermione wiped at her nose and eyes, and groaned. "Honestly, George, I know how to send a Howler. I even masked it – you know, made it a normal colour."

"A masked Howler?" George perked up. "You know how to do that?" He cleared his throat. "I see... well... another time for that. I'd better go help Fred before he's served up for dinner."

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, and she pulled George into a hug.

George returned it for a while, but started to fidget. "I... er... really should get down there... uh... right, then." He dashed quickly down the stairs, and Hermione fought with the door to her room until it recognised her and allowed her in.

She thought of her Dreamweaver for a moment, but she wasn't tired in the slightest; if anything, she was edgy to the point of being unable to breathe. It occurred to her that her problems no longer lay within her dreams; now her problem was the waking moments in between. She splashed water on her face from the basin.

"What a lovely hair style, dear," the mirror chirped.

Her eyes were red and her face was blotchy; her hair was the only thing in order. "Sod off," she snapped.

She tried reading as a diversion, but it failed her. Her Muggle books were worn from re-reading, and she couldn't bring herself to look at the materials Dumbledore had provided. She had gone through a book of Hawthorne poems in a daze and was forcing her way through *Pride and Prejudice*, when the floor rumbled and a loud din echoed

through her door from the corridor. She crept nervously to the door and pulled it open.

Moody must have sent the two posts with a single owl, Hermione decided; Harry banished both, but the owl had apparently been persistent. The awful sound of her own voice amplified a hundred times tore through her, and for a brief moment facing Voldemort again seemed preferable to standing there in the open threshold.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry

“Dunno, Cyril... smells like an ickle student to me,” the first gargoyle said.

The second gargoyle shook its head profusely. “Me thinks it’s the one the Baron was going on about, Godfrey.” It reached out with blazing speed and poked Harry in the chest with one of its claws. “See? Round head, round glasses, lots of that black stuff sprouting every which way –”

“It’s called hair, you dunce,” the first gargoyle snapped.

“Right... black stuff... and look there – the mark on its head. This one’s the Headmaster’s new boy,” the second gargoyle insisted.

The first gargoyle moaned. “No eating it, then? Not even a wee nibble?”

Harry chortled, as the second gargoyle growled and swatted the first hard enough to dislodge a chip of stone. “Not a lick, Godfrey!”

The first gargoyle sighed. “No pranking it, I suppose?”

The second gargoyle crossed its arms sternly. “No pranking.”

Harry decided to try politeness. “Look... I really do have a meeting to attend, so if you could just see your way to –”

The first gargoyle licked its lips. "It talks like an ickle student, Cyril..."

The dark wooden door between the gargoyles opened. McGonagall fixed them with a stern look. "Are you deterring Mr. Potter?" she demanded.

The second gargoyle – Cyril – insisted, "No, Madam, we was just having a chat with the little one."

The first gargoyle – Godfrey – readily agreed. "That's it, Madam – just a chat, we was!"

McGonagall let out a snort. "Don't press me, boys. We can always arrange for a changing of the guard."

Cyril snapped into a salute. "No, Madam! Won't happen again, we can tell you!"

Godfrey moved clear of the doorway, shivering. "Never again, Madam... can't face the parapets again..."

McGonagall harrumphed, and briskly re-entered the room. As Harry passed through the door, Godfrey sniffed, "Not even a little lick... blimey..."

A long table had been conjured in the centre of the panelled room beyond, and most of the chairs around it were filled. Dumbledore sat at the far end, chatting eagerly with Professor Sprout. Snape sat closest to Harry, glowering. "Well, well... look what the cat dragged in," he sneered.

McGonagall glared at him. "I'm in no mood, Severus." She looked pleadingly to Dumbledore. "Albus, you must do something about those gargoyles. Godfrey wanted to taste Potter."

Dumbledore looked up and smiled. "Ah, Harry! Welcome to our little gathering!"

Flitwick disengaged from an animated conversation with a wizard Harry didn't recognise. He seized Harry's hand with both of his own

and pumped profusely. “Splendid to see you, my boy – splendid, indeed!”

Harry became acutely aware of the eyes upon him. “Erm... thank you, Professor...” he managed.

“It’s Filius, Harry, and nothing more,” Flitwick went on gaily.

“Really, Flitwick, must you encourage the boy’s conceit?” Snape grumbled.

Flitwick released Harry’s hand. He shook his head at the Potions Master, and chided, “As rust consumes iron, Severus, so envy consumes itself.”

Snape didn’t respond to Flitwick; instead he tipped his head back just so, fixed Harry with a haughty look, and sneered, “Why, Potter, you have something to which you may look forward... after all, the envied generally find love and adulation upon death.”

Harry felt Hagrid’s presence before he actually saw his enormous friend erupt from a too-small chair in one corner of the room. “Is tha’ some kind ‘o threat ta Harry, Snape?” he boomed.

Dumbledore raised his hand. “Hagrid, that is quite enough,” he said gently. “Severus, do try to be less boorish.”

Hagrid clapped Harry on the back hard enough to make him stumble. “Welcome back, Harry – saved a seat fer yeh,” he said warmly. Harry found himself more or less deposited immediately to Dumbledore’s right. Hagrid moved from his seat in the corner to another directly across from Snape.

Professor Vector, the Arithmancy instructor, said quietly, “We are missing some of our complement, Headmaster. Are we seeing the consequences of your letter and... and the rest of it?”

“That seems as good a place to begin as any,” Dumbledore said with a nod. In a more forceful voice, he continued, “To those of you returning, I welcome you back to the hallowed halls of Hogwarts. To

those of you newly joining us, I offer my greetings and the appreciation of the Board of Governors. It seems as though the students have scarcely left us, and yet the autumn comes. Hogwarts' nine hundred and ninety-ninth academic year comes to us amidst the spectre of war, my friends. It is hardly the first time that this has been the case. In fact, 1996 is uncomfortably reminiscent of 1976 in many respects. The difference between this and all previous conflicts that have swirled around this institution is that the present Dark Lord views Hogwarts as a symbol of all that he reviles. Simply put, Hogwarts is in peril."

The room took on a deep quiet – not the kind that came from a silencing charm, Harry thought; it was the kind that he associated with the worst sort of news. Dumbledore surveyed the room before he went on. "After I sent the letter of which Anneliese made mention, some of our number decided that they could no longer serve this institution. Camille Sinistra has withdrawn her motion for a vote of no confidence in my service, and instead chose to resign her post. Mathias Reed was supportive of the vote, and also chose to resign –"

"Good riddance," someone muttered.

Dumbledore crooked an eyebrow. "Professors Sinistra and Reed articulated reasons for their lack of confidence that merit an open response on my part. I expect that we will display respect for their years of service, at the very least."

"Where's Professor Golding off to, then?" Flitwick asked.

"Margaret concluded that it was time to retire," Dumbledore answered. "She didn't have it in her to 'muddle through another war', as she put it. She asked that I convey to you a letter of apology, but I would have none of it. Margaret served admirably for the side of light in the last war, and will spend her dotage in Canada amidst her many grandchildren. I ask that you join me in three cheers for Professor Golding and best wishes for her future."

After three rounds of 'huzzah', Professor Sprout waved her floppy hat in the air. "Excuse me, Albus, but Binns doesn't seem to have joined

us. That's not like him; he's usually here waiting a day or two prior, isn't he?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, well, that would be related business. You see, Professor Binns came to a momentous decision sometime around the second week of July –"

"What, did the old buzzard realise he was dead?" Madam Hooch muttered. Harry put his hand over his mouth to hide the grin.

"Not exactly, Rolonda... you see, Professor Binns has been complaining for some time about a persistent pain in his abdomen as well as recurrent gout," Dumbledore explained. "Thusly, he elected a one-year sabbatical to sort himself out."

Professor Flitwick winced. "Oh, Albus... the opportunity presented itself, and you elected not to tell him..."

"It's not the sort of thing one springs as a surprise, Filius," Dumbledore sighed. "Sir Nicholas and the Bloody Baron have consented to have a long conversation with the Professor. I am hopeful for a satisfactory outcome." Harry noticed that the Headmaster seemed not to notice the twitters here and there.

"That makes for a rather large number of replacements in one year, Headmaster," Madam Pince noted. "Goodness, there's Astronomy, Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies, History of Magic... and the customary Defence vacancy, of course – though this time I'll offer no complaint whatever." She shifted stiffly in her chair at the resulting laughter.

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed, "and our friends at the Ministry did nothing to ease the burden of soliciting replacements."

McGonagall waved her wand, and a stack of parchments distributed themselves around the table. "The Wizarding Examinations Authority took it upon themselves to develop guidelines for the hiring of new professors," she spat.

"Can they do that?" Sprout gasped.

“They can and they have,” Dumbledore returned. “The Governors endorsed the guidelines for History of Magic by a bare majority, and will be taking up the balance in October. As of August 1 of this year, any wizard or witch hired into the position of professor for History of Magic must have attained a score of O on the related NEWT, and must possess an unbroken wizarding lineage to the Goblin Rebellion or before.”

Vector pursed her lips. “A witch or wizard of long lineage would know the oral tradition that a Muggle-born would not,” she reasoned.

“That would be fine, if the wizarding oral tradition were reflected in either the OWL or NEWT papers,” McGonagall countered.

“I suppose they’ll want purebloods for every position now?” Sprout mused.

Dumbledore cut through the buzz that had begun to fill the room. “I have obtained a replacement for the History of Magic post who satisfies the Examination Authority’s new guideline. While I had given serious consideration to Mr. Arthur Weasley for the position –” He had to wait for the room to settle, before he went on, “– we have unexpectedly acquired another of our alumni who is eminently qualified. She earned one of the highest OWL scores for the discipline ever recorded, and in fact tied for the highest NEWT score. Professor Covelli... Dr. Covelli, rather... will be joining us at some point during the first week of classes.”

Snape drew himself up. “Headmaster,” he asked in a dangerously silky voice, “surely I misheard... did you refer to our future colleague as a ‘doctor’? Is that not a term used by Muggle healers?”

“Most definitely, Severus,” Dumbledore said with the air of a man telling a splendid joke. “I wouldn’t trifle with Lucia, however; she is most definitely one of us.”

Flitwick squeaked and nearly fell from his chair. “Lucia! You don’t mean your apprentice? I had thought the apprenticeship was severed prematurely...”

"I compliment you on your splendid memory, Filius," Dumbledore said. "For the benefit of those whose connections to Hogwarts are of a shorter span than Professor Flitwick's or my own, Dr. Covelli went by Lucia Greengrass during her school days." Snape sat stone-faced, while McGonagall took on a smile that Harry could only describe as wicked.

"Is this doctor a relation of Daphne Greengrass?" Vector asked.

"Miss Greengrass would be her niece," McGonagall replied.

Snape said tonelessly, "Headmaster... this news will cause distress in certain circles... we must consider the implications –"

"At the earliest possible convenience, Severus – I promise you," Dumbledore said lightly.

Flitwick said merrily, "I take it that your other appointments will cause the Ministry equal distress?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. He cleared his throat to recapture everyone's attention. "Having made mention of my erstwhile apprentice and having referred to the likely reception of some of my appointments, it seems appropriate to introduce the first new member of our staff. I am pleased to formally introduce my new apprentice, Harry Potter."

Snape's icy voice cut through the polite applause. "Camille's concerns do indeed merit a response. Is it possible that she was making a valid point about the Headmaster's capacity for impartiality?" The room went deeply quiet for the second time.

McGonagall's flinty burr tore at the silence. "What are you playing at, Severus?"

"You left hundreds of students and the balance of your staff at the mercy of Dolores Umbridge, Headmaster, solely to protect Potter from punishment," Snape accused. "I have been forced to watch the increasing marginalisation of my charges, chiefly for the edification of



Potter and his minions. Now you bait the Ministry, and to what end? I do not – and I will not – question your capacity to lead this school. I ask pointedly whether you might someday weigh the fate of an entire school against that of your golden boy, and find the school wanting.”

No one dared speak. Harry watched Dumbledore for any sort of reaction, and there seemed to be none – no flash of anger, no sense of betrayal, nothing. The Headmaster simply said, “Our new colleagues have been kept waiting long enough. I shall address your question after they have been properly welcomed.” He motioned to McGonagall, who opened the door, stoutly reprimanded the gargoyles and waved her wand.

The Fat Friar drifted through the wall, just to one side of the door. “A pleasant day to you, good people. Sir Nicholas and Lady Fawcett have vested in me the honour of introducing to you the newest members of our Hogwarts family –”

“I take it we’re to come in now?” called a wizened voice. The tiny and stooped woman who owned the loud voice nearly walked through the Friar as she entered. “I’m not one for standing on ceremony. Good afternoon to you all.”

“Oh, my!” shrieked the Friar. “Er... may I present Madam Griselda Marchbanks, appointed as Professor of Astronomy.”

“Hello, Albus,” Marchbanks bellowed as she walked along the perimeter of the room. “Nice to see you, Filius – how could I ever forget that unorthodox stance of yours?... hello, Pomona – still the highest Herbology practical score I’ve ever given... ah, Snape – a masterful paper in last month’s Proceedings, I’ll have you know... Minerva, how do you fare? That was a most cowardly attack...” She stopped before Harry. “And you, Mr. Potter, I understand that Albus has taken you on... splendid.”

Sprout doffed her hat like a schoolgirl brought before her Head of House. “Madam Marchbanks! But you’re the head of... that is to say, we’re deeply honoured to have you, but... how shall I put it... why do we have you?”

Marchbanks turned to face the length of the table, and leaned heavily on her walking stick. "My faith in the integrity of the Ministry has been tested beyond repair," she proclaimed. "Any remaining hope for the education of our youth lies here, and it is here that I shall stand."

Amidst the murmurs, Harry distinctly heard Flitwick sigh, "Heavens, the Ministry's running out of good people..."

"Professor Marchbanks, would you be so kind as to speak to the specific events that led to your resignation from the Examinations Authority?" Dumbledore asked loudly.

Marchbanks hesitated for a moment. "I will not divulge the names of certain specific parties, Albus; they are sure to sully their own reputations without my assistance. Suffice it to say that undue influence was placed upon the Examinations Authority to vacate the OWL results of one of your most recent examinees. I was able to quash this nefarious scheme, and the certification of said results was my last act."

Dumbledore smiled broadly. "Thusly I can now announce that Miss Hermione Granger has become the thirty-eighth Hogwarts student to earn the maximum number of OWLs. Further, her overall average score is the highest recorded in fifty-three years, and the third highest ever recorded." Even Snape applauded at that, Harry noted.

"I daresay that the young lady's overall score may well have been higher, were it not for the interruptions during the Astronomy and History of Magic examinations," Marchbanks added. Harry felt a twinge of guilt at the last. Worse, he was immediately certain that he knew why Hermione's examination scores had been questioned, and he wanted to be wrong.

Sprout put the question before he could bring himself to speak. "Why would someone single out Miss Granger's scores...?" She trailed off, and Harry assumed she had just drawn the same conclusion he had reached.

Marchbanks' deeply wrinkled face fell. "There was absolutely no evidence that Miss Granger manipulated the examination results in

any way. In fact, there is little point in attempting to manipulate the system; any student capable of a successful effort would by necessity exceed the O-standard in most subjects. Despite this, a protest was carried as far as the Minister's Office." Her voice trembled. "I am a member in good standing of the Daughters of the Goblin Wars. I am proud of who I am. I am not proud of what others are willing to do in the name of blood. Examinations – are – a – matter – of – merit!" She banged her walking stick against the floor as an exclamation point.

"Well said, Griselda," Dumbledore said, to mumblings of approval all around. Harry was left nauseous. He placed one more mental check in his column of reasons why the wizarding world might not be worth saving.

The Fat Friar drifted around uncomfortably. "Headmaster... if it pleases the assembled staff...?"

"Yes, yes, of course, mustn't keep everyone waiting," Dumbledore encouraged him.

"Very good, noble sir!" The Friar plunged his head through the wall for a moment, and then returned to his position. "May I present Mister Marcus Detheridge, appointed as Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts..." As the professor entered, the Friar added quietly, "...and may God have mercy on you, my good man."

Detheridge was a tall sharp-edged man with streaks of grey in his hair. He had a strong brow and dark eyes and carried himself with something of an athletic grace, even though he had a slight limp. He wore a rough-hewn shirt and trousers, and a long coat cut from a heavy oily-looking cloth. "It may be a bit late for that, Friar," Detheridge said; his eyebrows nearly concealed his eyes as he grinned.

Dumbledore stood and gave over his seat at the head of the table to Marchbanks. He strode to Detheridge and warmly shook his hand. "Welcome, Marcus. Any words for us?"

"Your students have lost a year of instruction," Detheridge said; "There's a lot to be done here." Harry had seen a few shows from

America on the telly, and Detheridge sounded as if he might have come from there. The new professor abruptly turned to face Snape. "You have something to say?" he rumbled.

"Later, perhaps," Snape sniffed.

Detheridge leaned toward the Potions Master. "Severus Snape," he declared; then his eyes narrowed. "That's right... I know all about you."

"Here, take a seat next to Professor Hagrid," Dumbledore offered.

Detheridge broke into a smile. "Hagrid, is it? Oh, I certainly know about you!"

Hagrid stammered, "Yeh do? Er... well... there might be summat I ken do fer yeh... yeh know, if yeh need 'ta bring in some creatures..."

The Fat Friar attempted to catch Dumbledore's eye. After a while, Harry tugged on the edge of Dumbledore's robe and pointed. "Of course... do go on, Friar," the Headmaster urged.

The Friar announced, "To the Headmaster and esteemed faculty, may I present Professor Andromeda Tonks, appointed to the Muggle Studies vacancy."

Mrs. Tonks nervously entered the room. "Hello, everyone," she said quietly.

Dumbledore quickly went to her. "For those who are unacquainted with Professor Tonks, she attended Hogwarts as Andromeda Black. Both she and her husband are licensed solicitors who specialise in the needs of Muggle-borns and others of us who retain financial and legal ties to the Muggle world."

"Severus, you should close your mouth; it's not a good look for you," McGonagall said primly. Snape was gaping like a fish, and it took everything in Harry to keep from bursting out laughing.

Mrs. Tonks spoke so quietly that Harry could barely hear her. "It really should have been Ted, you know? He's better qualified for this. The Ministry's desire for a pureblood in this post is appalling. Thankfully, I'm not the sort of pureblood they had in mind."

"Morgana be cursed... they really are insisting on a completely pureblood faculty?" Sprout said in a near whisper.

"The Examinations Authority has only made that recommendation for History of Magic, Ancient Runes and Muggle Studies... thus far," McGonagall told her.

Mrs. Tonks sat between Sprout and Trelawney, who Harry had suspected of somehow being asleep despite her open protuberant eyes. Mrs. Tonks extended her hand toward Trelawney, who suddenly came to life. "Welcome, my dear," the Divination professor said mistily. "I've been expecting you."

Mrs. Tonks muttered, "Likewise, I'm sure," and Trelawney withdrew in confusion.

"If I might complete my duties, Headmaster? There is a ghosts' council scheduled for four o'clock," the Fat Friar said pleasantly.

"Of course, good Friar," Dumbledore said. "Make our final introduction, if you would?"

The Friar announced with a flourish, "Lastly, may I present Mister Algernon Croaker, who once served Hogwarts as Professor of Arithmancy and has now returned as the newly appointed Professor of Ancient Runes."

No one was forthcoming. The Friar looked around, and then shrugged. He waited for a few moments before passing through the wall and into the corridor. "Oh, quite sorry!" someone called out.

Croaker was ancient and rotund, almost comically so in contrast to Dumbledore. He looked as though the Friar might have been one of his forebears. "Lost in conversation there," Croaker explained. "Never

thought I'd see the day when a centaur was teaching at Hogwarts. I believe old Nigellus would have died of pleurisy on the spot."

Firenze followed Croaker into the staffroom. "Good afternoon, my colleagues," he said. "Mars is exceptionally bright. It is visible to the eyes of centaurs through the daylight hours now."

"Mars?" Marchbanks bellowed. "Mars isn't particularly bright at present; it's receding toward aphelion. Now next fall, when it reaches perihelion... then we will see the closest conjunction in fifty years."

"Yes, Mars will become too bright for the eyes of the centaurs to behold," Firenze agreed. "It may be the end of times for my people."

"Indeed, I have foreseen great darkness upon us —" Trelawney intoned.

Croaker sat heavily. "I heartily agree with the Seer," he said. "The sun does set in about five hours, so we'd best be on with this." Trelawney excused herself to her tower amidst barely suppressed titters.

"Yes... well... welcome one and all," Dumbledore said. "Before we address questions of curriculum and logistics and such, I wish to address Severus' question. However, I am not quite certain how I wish to approach the response... Harry? What do you wish to be told?"

Harry had to force his eyes off of Croaker. He focussed on the Headmaster and sought to clear his mind. "How much do you trust the people in this room, sir?" Harry asked. "Do you trust them as much as... the old crowd?"

"I do not require an answer, Headmaster," Snape insisted. "The question was rhetorical in nature."

"I believe that all concerned require some sense of what is at stake, Severus," Dumbledore responded. "I shall address your question."

Snape fidgeted in his chair. "I would prefer that you did not."

Dumbledore gazed at Snape silently for several seconds. "You have the look of a man prepossessed by potions left to heat," he offered at last.

"Asphodel is inherently unstable," Snape grumbled.

"Attend to your work, Severus," Dumbledore said. "Nothing will take place here that cannot be gleaned later." Snape nodded in a very formal way and exited with a swish of his cloak.

"Every staff has one," Croaker muttered.

Harry's eyes drifted back to Croaker, even as Dumbledore launched into his explanation of Harry's significance. It wasn't as though he needed to pay attention to the story – he'd heard it more times than he cared to hear, and he had to live it. Dumbledore gave to the staff the first half of the prophecy, just as he had given to the Order. He went on to summarise Harry's experiences over five years at Hogwarts. It was mildly interesting to note the reactions of various professors. Strangely, it seemed that Croaker might know as much or more than any of them. He began to consider how he might corner the ancient wizard and force a conversation. So many roads seemed to lead to or through the man – the cognivores, Heather's wild talent... Harry wondered if Croaker had been the source for the servant-binding curse. He wondered what had caused Croaker to leave the Department of Mysteries after a century or more.

It was clear that all of the professors were to participate in Harry's further education, even ones he didn't know who taught fields he hadn't studied – like Vector and Croaker. He supposed that they weren't doing it for him; some were doing it for Dumbledore, others for their own self-interest. He chose to be grateful just the same. Croaker caught his eye at one point, and seemed to look right through him. Surely the man was at Hogwarts for more than the teaching of ancient runes, Harry decided. For some reason it didn't feel like the reason was for Harry's instruction, and there was something disquieting about that, something very unsettling. There was an unsettling air about Croaker, Harry concluded, and he resolved to discover what that might mean.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione

“Hermione? I know you’re in there,” Tonks called through the door. “The window’s still spelled shut, and you can’t do McGonagall’s tabby cat trick... at least I don’t think you can...”

Hermione lay in the dark, curled almost into a ball with a pillow clutched to her chest. They’d left her alone at first, all of them, for two hours or more. Tonks had been at the door half an hour now, and she hadn’t even had to shout out a ‘go away’ or a ‘sod off’.

“You know, I could turn this over to Fred and George,” Tonks warned. “Things could get out of hand.”

I can wait this out, Hermione thought. If I wait long enough, they’ll all leave.

“You’ll have to come out eventually, you know; the loo’s down the hall,” Tonks shouted. “I know... hang on...”

Hermione wondered what Tonks had planned; she wasn’t nervous or frightened about it, just curious. Nothing can touch me in here, she told herself; number eleven was a safe place. Clomping footsteps in the corridor marked Tonks’ return. She heard the whispering and muttering of a complex spell, and then she heard water... running, rushing water.

“Go away!” she moaned.

“I’ll just come back, of course,” Tonks laughed.

“Fine,” Hermione shouted, “I’ll see you in October!”

“That’s bollocks – McGonagall would hex me if I let you hold out for that long,” Tonks pouted loudly, over the sound of the water. “I’ll definitely have to set the twins after you by morning.”



Hermione sat up. "You're a nasty bint," she snapped, "and running water won't work."

A half hour later, Hermione bounced uncomfortably on the edge of the bed. Tonks definitely pays for this, she promised herself. She dug through her cases until she found the object of her interest – a carefully folded Extendable Ear. A few moments of listening placed Tonks immediately outside the door, and one or two older Weasleys to the right – it could have been the twins or Bill, she imagined. The water closet was to the left. She decided to put her faith in the element of surprise.

Tonks howled when the door struck her, and she howled again when Hermione ran over her. Someone behind her called, "Hermione, wait!", as though anything short of an outright war could successfully stand between her and the water closet. She slammed shut the door, and was pleased to discover that Tonks hadn't disabled the door lock. All the doors and walls at the Leaky Cauldron were spelled for privacy; she was still safe.

"Damn it, Hermione!" Tonks bellowed. "What sort of shoes were those?"

"Hikers," Hermione hissed, "and you deserved it for that water business."

"Ha! Wouldn't work, she said!" Tonks crowed.

Hermione growled, but resolved to resume her silence. After a few minutes, Tonks sighed loudly. "Fine, have it your way. We leave for the station tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

Hermione waited a little while longer. She knew that someone would eventually want to use the water closet and it was only right that she give it up. The corridor was empty, as was her room save her belongings. She turned to close the door and found her way blocked by Ron.

"You didn't think you could wait us out, did you?" he said with a grin as he closed them inside the room.

“Persistent lot, aren’t you?” she grumbled.

“That Howler... a thing of beauty, that’s what Fred said,” he laughed. “One brilliant bit of work, I figure.”

“I’m surprised your mum didn’t drag all of you straight back to the Burrow,” Hermione sighed.

Ron faltered. “There is no Burrow... oh, maybe you didn’t remember...”

“I knew it was sacked, but it’s been a month,” Hermione pointed out. “What happened? Was it just too much to go back there? I mean... that’s understandable...”

Ron took a step back, and then began to pace across the room and back. “Nothing will stand there. We were set up in tents for a good long while – like at the World Cup, right? – and we kept hoping...” His fists were clenching and unclenching. “Nobody can figure it out, see? We’ve had everyone you can imagine wandering about the place. They didn’t just sack the house, Hermione, they... they poisoned it somehow. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

Hermione decided that if it was possible to feel worse about the Howler, she indeed now felt worse. “W-what are your Mum and Dad going to do, then?” she asked.

“Harry let them use his new place, up in Scotland.” Ron’s grin came back, at least a little. “You should have seen him trying to give away a bloody castle to my mum – it was cracking!”

“Right... your mum...” Hermione trailed off.

“Hermione... this isn’t all over the Howler, right? That wasn’t the first one she’s ever gotten, you know. She didn’t exactly deny saying those things to your mum, or something like them. Dad wasn’t pleased. I’m not happy about it, myself. Ginny... gods, Hermione, you should have seen her. ‘Oi, if you think you’ll be breeding me off like

some prize Kneazle...’ Poor Mum...” Ron shook his head. “At this rate, she might give up talking for a while...”

“Good,” Hermione muttered. “Just desserts, I’d say.”

Ron kept ploughing on. “Yeah, she cocked things up with Professor Lupin even worse than... hold on there! Did you say ‘good’?”

The thinking part of Hermione wanted to just let it all slide away, to avoid the Weasleys for a time and pretend nothing had happened. The newly risen part of her – ‘Hermione, version 2’, as Dr. Covelli had put it – was just as furious as when she’d written the Howler. “She didn’t think for a moment how my Mum would feel, Ron. It was no different than saying that my Mum’s not good enough for me, that I’d look down on her now because I have this thing – because I can use bloody magic!”

Ron took a step backward, his hands held up. “Hermione, I said she was wrong! What do you want from me?”

She knew she was getting too angry – angrier than was justified, angrier than was safe – but she couldn’t stop herself. “What do you think, Ron? How do you see it? Do you think I should look down on my Mum and Dad? Do you think you’re superior to Muggles?”

“No, I don’t think you should look down on your Mum and Dad!” Ron snapped. “Superior? I don’t know! I can use magic, they can’t – that makes us different, right? Look... I don’t even understand how you get through a day when you’re home with them – it must be nothing but work all the time! I mean, how do Muggles ever get anything done? The thing is, somehow, they’ve got all these things – the tellyphones and the autocars and the flying machines and the buildings. I guess we’re just different, that’s all... just different.” He stepped forward and took her shaking hand in his. “Er... you aren’t going to blow me up or anything... are you?”

She let out a nervous laugh that quickly descended into tears, and she hugged him like he was the last thing left to keep her afloat. She could feel his instant discomfort but she held on nonetheless. After a while, he draped one arm around her shoulders and ran his free hand

awkwardly up and down her back. "I'm sorry, you know, about what happened and all," he blurted out.

"You were there, too," she said. "I'm glad nothing happened to you, to any of you."

"It wasn't the same, and you know it," Ron protested. "I just had to sit there and watch what V-Voldemort did, and then afterward with Harry... I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where I should be. You were hurt, and he was just... you know how he was..."

"No, I don't," Hermione whispered. "I wasn't really there, not afterward."

"Well, you know how he is. At least you... you know, you went off and did something about it. He just kept going." Ron sighed. "I keep wondering when it'll hit him, like last summer when all the business with Diggory hit him? It'll be the moment we get back to Hogwarts – you just know it."

"I'm not ready for it," Hermione said.

"What, for Harry to go off like a blasting curse?" Ron snorted. "I don't think there's any getting ready for it, not really."

"No," Hermione said, "I mean I'm not ready for any of it. I'm not ready to go back."

Ron briskly rubbed at her back for several strokes, before he at last pulled free. "I've always had an itch to get back – every year, see? By the middle of August, it's time for me to go. But this year... it's never going to be the same, is it? Four of us in the dorm, probably half my classes without either of you... no Quidditch with him... probably won't eat with us anymore, probably has to sit up there with the teachers..."

"Everything will be different," Hermione agreed.

Ron set his jaw. "It's up to us to keep things right, then," he said. "We drag him to meals, we bring him to study in the Common Room, I take him out flying... maybe he'll help coach the team –"

"No," Hermione said.

Ron's eyes bulged. "No? What does that mean – 'no'?"

Hermione's hands went to her hips in frustration. "It's an act of refusal, Ron. N – O. No."

"I've heard you say 'no' before; I know what it means," Ron fumed.

Hermione closed her eyes. "I didn't set out to hurt you. I..."

Ron sighed. "I know you didn't. Everything is for the best with you – always has been... and that's why I don't get it – it's not like you to just chuck him out in the cold."

"No!" Hermione shouted. "That's not it, not at all! I intend for him to do as he wants! We leave him an open seat at the table, we make sure he has access to the Common Room, you invite him to watch a practice if he wants, and then we let him choose. He's Albus Dumbledore's apprentice, Ron! His life isn't going to be like ours, not anymore. We give him the choice to keep the best parts of his old life – that's all we can do!"

The tips of Ron's ears went blood red. "We can do better than that, Hermione!"

Hermione held firm. "We can be strong enough that he doesn't have to worry about us – that's all we can do!"

"You're different. You've changed, a lot I think," Ron said. "I'm sorry that happened to you." He smirked. "Except for the hair – I'm not sorry about that. George was right, it's good on you."

Hermione looked strangely at the young man before, the one who she suddenly didn't know anymore. "I'm not sorry about the hair either. You know... you've changed, too."

"I wish I could change it all back," Ron grumbled.

"You can't," Hermione said.

Ron smiled faintly. "I can wish... that's allowed, isn't it?" They stood quietly in the lengthening shadows for quite a while. He broke the silence. "Ginny will come looking, eventually... or Mum."

"I can't handle them, not today," Hermione said.

Ron nodded. "Then you don't have to handle them." He reached out and squeezed her hand. "If I don't see you... I'll save a compartment on the Express."

He left, and she stared at the door that divided them. The Ron Weasley who had come to call on her in room eleven definitely wasn't her Ron, not her and Harry's Ron. It took her quite some time to admit to herself that she preferred this changed Ron. He was more thoughtful, more considerate, better groomed, better spoken – and all he'd had to do was arrange an attack by monstrous psychic brain-creatures and then become convinced that he was fated to die young.

The old Hermione would have comforted this Ron, would have felt something more than long-standing friendship for him – it occurred to her that the old Hermione might have said 'yes' to this new Ron, that night at the Shrieking Shack. She wondered what Luna was making of the new Ron, and what Luna – also clearly changed forever – wanted for herself. The new Hermione and the new Ron would be better friends, she decided. She didn't know for certain what else the new Hermione wanted, other than victory and a full life for Harry and justice for herself, or perhaps revenge, or something that fell between the two.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry

Mr. Granger topped Harry's glass with more red wine – chianti, he'd called it. "Just the right sort of body for this meal, eh? It must be from

a small vintner... too strong an edge to it for a commercial house... what do you think of it, dear?"

Mrs. Granger toyed with her food, from one side of the plate to the other. It was the same way that Hermione toyed with food leading up to examinations, Harry recognised. "Perhaps it was brought from the villa?" she offered absently.

The meal was Italian. Harry knew this from Shona's food, and from the reading that had come of it. Unlike so many meals of the last four weeks, there were two dishes he'd eaten before. Apparently, Dumbledore had arranged for the house-elves to learn these recipes; Harry wondered if his intention was to impress this Dr. Covelli, his old apprentice. The Grangers had met the woman – had stayed with her, in fact. Harry had begun to wonder what sort of doctor this Covelli might be, and whether Hermione and her parents had stayed there because she was a particular sort of doctor, and the wondering had left him on edge.

He hadn't the slightest idea how to go about asking the right sort of questions, and he was wary of giving the wrong sort of answers; it was far easier to focus on the food, at first. Mr. Granger declared the meal very good. Mrs. Granger had very little to say at all. Harry decided as the meal progressed that Mrs. Granger had the right idea, because he was fairly sure he'd had too much to drink, and part of him wondered if that was Mr. Granger's intention. He'd begun surreptitiously pouring a good portion of his chianti into an adjacent potted plant. Unfortunately, the plant had begun to sway in time to the light background music that the house-elves had arranged. Harry had struggled to find a new destination for the wine that had continued to come, one other than the floor or his mouth. He had figured that the Grangers would notice even a quick evanesco – Mrs. Granger at any rate – and he feared that he might vanish the entire table in his hazy state.

Mrs. Granger placed her hand atop her husband's, which was wrapped around the neck of a fresh chianti bottle. "Thomas... please don't open another," she said in a near-whisper.

Mr. Granger took up his glass with his free hand. "Why ever not? We're celebrating tonight." He raised the glass and winked at Harry. "To our imprisonment!"

"What do you want from me?" Harry asked before he knew what he was saying. Mr. Granger's glass stopped halfway to his mouth. Mrs. Granger's hand fell limp to her side. "I'm sorry, that didn't come out right," Harry hastily added. His mouth was suddenly quite dry.

Mr. Granger jabbed his finger in the air dramatically. "We want our life back, that's what we want. We've only just recovered our daughter, and now we're supposed to just give her up again – just walk away and hide? Bloody sodding damn, Harry!" Mrs. Granger eased the still-sealed bottle free and quietly set it beneath the table.

"I wish there was another way," Harry told them. "I wish I could just fix this, you know; I wish... I wish a lot of things." He licked his lips, and wished they would stay moistened.

"We don't hold you responsible for what's happened, Harry," Mrs. Granger offered. She did, of course – Harry felt something not right coming from her, something like pain or hurt or anger.

"We're responsible," Mr. Granger blurted out. "We brought her into the world, she came from us. She's what she is because of us. She's nothing to you people, but she's something to us, I can tell you; she's everything to us!" He shook his whole glass at Harry, and chianti dribbled down his hand.

Harry's mouth dropped open. "What do you mean, she's nothing to us? What's that supposed to mean?" It was odd – he didn't mean to shout, but it came out that way. "Did you know –" He stopped for a moment, determined to lower his voice. "Did you know that your daughter had the third highest scores ever on the OWLs? Third highest ever! I was... well, I was over the moon when I heard that, I can tell you!"

Mr. Granger's eyes widened. "Wha... we never heard a thing about that... nothing of that sort at all! That's... that's fantastic – isn't it, Cordelia? It's fantastic!"



“Yes... smashing, isn’t it...” Mrs. Granger responded weakly. Her mind was churning on something, Harry was sure of it. It was strange how much like Hermione she was; he almost laughed aloud at the thought, but somehow managed to hold it in.

Mr. Granger pushed back in his chair, confused. “It’s not fantastic?” he asked. “Seems as though it should be fantastic...”

“She was expecting those scores weeks ago; they never arrived,” Mrs. Granger said. Her brow wrinkled. “How is it that you know Hermione’s scores?”

Harry awkwardly back-pedalled. “Well... it’s not that I know her scores, exactly. I know how she did generally... er... it really is fantastic – amazing, actually... I mean, it’s not amazing that she did so well... it’s just... she’s amazing, that’s what I meant...” He glanced around nervously. “I could stand for a glass of water right now. Merlin, it’s dry in here... um... do you think it’s dry in here?”

“Not especially, no,” Mrs. Granger said. She had the oddest expression, Harry thought – it seemed almost as if she was trying not to laugh at him.

Mr. Granger abruptly leaned forward. “You know, that’s a really good question – a brilliant question. What happened to Hermione’s scores, then?”

Harry felt trapped. His head suddenly throbbed, but the throbbing was nowhere near his scar. He sighed. “The thing is... oh, sod it. The bloody Ministry was playing with the results. They can’t handle that someone like Hermione is so smart. Everyone wants to be able to pretend that blood matters, that the right blood is better.” Something he’d heard before – on the telly, or the wireless, or some such place – popped into his head and out of his mouth: “This is a perfect example of what happens when cousins marry.”

Mrs. Granger froze for a moment, before her mouth began to flicker. Mr. Granger immediately burst into rolling laughter. “Cousins... oh, good Lord... that’s it exactly!”

"They're like poodles," Mrs. Granger snorted, "or... or the royals!"

"Oh, yes!" Mr. Granger howled. "Poor buggers... can you imagine being a man with Queen Margaret's face?"

When she caught her breath, Mrs. Granger smiled at Harry. "Oh, you've no idea how much we needed that," she explained. "Things were said, and... it's just good to hear someone else say that this pureblood business is ridiculous."

"It's dangerous, that's what it is," Harry insisted. Mrs. Granger's comment slowly sank in. "Er... what sort of things? What did someone say to you?" he demanded.

Mrs. Granger looked away. "We really shouldn't draw you into this," she said.

"If someone's on to Hermione about who she is or where she comes from, then I'm already in," Harry snapped. He couldn't figure why his voice was so bloody loud; it was as though he couldn't keep it down.

Mrs. Granger sighed. "You see, Molly Weasley –"

"Oh, bloody hell!" Harry shouted. He tossed back the contents of his wine glass, and for a moment his lips were whetted though his throat burned. "Molly Weasley can't keep her bloody mouth shut to save her life!"

"Harry!" Mrs. Granger chided him.

He angrily brushed his fringe from his eyes. "It's true! She called Heather a tart, and she never even met her! She... she was screaming at Remus Lupin for no reason, not really... I mean, I'm angry with him, but she had no right... she had no right..." He found himself lost in the thought, and it took a moment to right himself. "What'd she say, then? Come on, out with it!"

Mrs. Granger faltered. "I honestly don't think –"

Mr. Granger waved her off. "Molly wanted us to know that we shouldn't feel bad when Hermione eventually quits on us, since that's what happens... seems she'll decide it's too hard to live around us, once she's completely become one of you. Even better, she'll have no prospects unless she marries the right sort of man, because she comes from us!"

Harry felt the blood run out of his face. "Mrs. Weasley... she said that? She... she actually said that? She said that about Hermione?" he stammered.

"That's a fair summary," Mrs. Granger conceded.

"That's... it's... well, it's mad, that's what it is!" Harry thundered.

"Hermione even admitted that purebloods seem to do all the advancing in your world," Mrs. Granger added.

"That's ridiculous... it's... she's better than that!" Harry raged. "I... I won't allow it, that's all. It won't be like that!"

Mr. Granger shifted awkwardly in his chair. "Harry... I know you're a powerful young man, but you 'won't allow it'? Seems a bit grand, doesn't it?"

"She might not be able to go anywhere with the Ministry – who would want to? – but I won't let her be anything less than she can manage," Harry insisted. "If she wants to write, I'll have it printed. If she wants to do research or something of that sort, I'll get her a laboratory, whatever she needs. What she wants, she gets, and the bloody purebloods can just get out of the way!" The idea that Hermione would have to rely on some fool like Fudge in order to get along made him absolutely furious; his face felt steaming hot.

"A few million pounds will allow you to live comfortably, Harry... but it'll hardly allow for that," Mrs. Granger said gently.

"A few million pounds?" Harry struggled for several seconds to make the connection. "Oh, you mean what I got from Sirius? That was nothing."

Mrs. Granger's eyebrows slowly rose. "I'm sorry... did you say that your inheritance was 'nothing'?"

Harry waved his hands dismissively. "There's a couple hundred times that much in cash alone in the Potter Trust, plus all the property and other things. I'm stinking rich, you know – rolling in it." He broke into a big grin and started to laugh – it was more of a giggle, really, and he was sure that he should feel ridiculous but he didn't feel that way at all. It was so easy to talk to the Grangers, and that fact seemed rather odd.

"That's my reward for not getting offed," he went on. "Thirteen family lines stop with me – how about that? What would I ever do with it all? So, Hermione gets whatever she wants, do you hear? I can't imagine a better use for it! I mean, the Black money... it's just blood money. It's all on my hands..." His throat tightened sharply, and turned his voice into a croak. "It's all over my hands... the blood... he's dead... Sirius, he's dead... and all those people... they were Death Eaters, I hadn't any choice, but there was all the blood..." He wasn't right, and he knew that now. The room was warm, he was warm, there had been too much wine, the back of his hand tingled – he wasn't right.

He looked up. Mr. Granger was staring at him in something like horror. Mrs. Granger was getting up from her chair. "Harry..."

Harry stood and stumbled backward; his chair tumbled onto its side. "No... um... there's no better use for it. Hermione... she gets what she wants, and you... look, I want you to think about where you want to go. Don't tell anyone else, of course! Anywhere... you can go anywhere. If you have to do this... anywhere! I... I mean it! Oh, and I've been thinking about how you can communicate with Hermione; it'll have to be discreet, of course, but... I'll figure this out, so I can... I can fix this, you know, I... is it hot in here? It's really hot in here..."

Mrs. Granger was coming for him. "Harry, please... sit, would you?"

His legs felt like lead. "So much to do tomorrow, you know... really must be off..." He leaned heavily against the hidden door that led from Dumbledore's private dining room into the corridor beyond.

“Now you think about it... I mean it, anywhere!” He had to do that much for them; they were losing everything, and he had some idea of how that felt. Something about a lovely dinner fell from his mouth as he pushed through the door.

He couldn't manage the staircases. Every time he thought one was supposed to move, it didn't. When he thought he should descend, he found himself ascending. He nearly fell several times. After something on the order of a million flights, he found himself within sight of the entrance hall and decided that a respite was in order. He sat down carefully, feeling first for a trick stair. It had become even hotter, if that were possible. He thought that he heard Mrs. Norris padding along at one point. At some time after that – minutes, or hours; he couldn't be sure – there was a hand on the back of his shoulder and words in a vaguely familiar accent. Some words made sense, others did not; few remained in his memory.

He rose and he fell and he drifted along weightlessly. He was inside, then he was outside and enjoying the cool breeze, and then he was inside again. A woman's voice joined the first.

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“...I can't believe he was drinking in the castle. Thank the stars you found him first, Mr. Detheridge.”

“I had an inkling something was wrong. One of the house-elves told me that he was dining in the Headmaster's chambers tonight, which is strange – Albus is out until the morning. I'm very surprised that Albus would leave strong drink within reach, in any case.”

“The poor lad's certainly seen enough to drive him to drink. He won't be served here, I can promise you that.”

“I assume that I can trust your discretion regarding this evening, Rosmerta?”

“He won't be hurt on my account. I've seen nothing, nothing at all...”

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There was nothing for a time, at least nothing that sunk in. Then the first voice drew close to his ear.

“The first one’s free, Mr. Potter. Don’t let this happen again,” Detheridge said. The door opened and closed, and all went quiet.

## Chapter Thirty-one

### ALL ABOARD

September 1, 1996

Harry

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Go away!” Harry shouted, and he instantly regretted it. The sound echoed in his ears and he nearly bit his tongue, which seemed to be in need of de-gnoming.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

He rolled off his bed and fell hard onto the floor. “The rest of your life with a pig’s tail – that’s what’s coming to you!” he bellowed, and then quickly cradled his head in his hands.

Hedwig screeched at him from her perch and he groaned, “Not you, too?”

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

At last it dawned on him that the tapping was an owl at the window, not a wizard at the door. He threw up the shade and opened the glass in one motion. Before he could duck, the angriest owl he’d ever seen was upon him – screeching, nipping and clawing madly. He flailed his arms to keep it at bay, but it proceeded to shred his shirtsleeves. With a piercing shriek, Hedwig fell upon the mad owl and it retreated to the corner of the bedroom. Harry took in heaving breaths as he stripped off his shirt and used the remnants to stanch the blood dripping from his forearms. The owl began to advance again, wings flapping menacingly, but Hedwig snapped and hissed and cowed it back into the corner.

Harry stormed to the shelf beside Hedwig’s perch, which was a mistake since the quick movement sent blood pounding into places in

his head that had apparently been absent of fluids for some time. He snatched up a handful of owl treats and flung them at the crazed owl, one at a time, as hard as he could manage. "Look what you did to my arms, you lunatic!" he snapped, and the sound nearly put him to the floor.

He knew that the owl was unlikely to leave until he collected the post, but he wasn't about to get near enough to snatch it. Instead, he held up his hand, concentrated on keeping his voice as quiet and small as possible, and whispered, "Accio owl post." The mad owl was flung onto its back as it shot toward Harry, talons first. He quickly moved to one side, but the post worked its way free and flew into his outstretched hand before the owl reached him. Hedwig attempted to force it back to the corner; instead it perched in the open window, lifted its tail to make a substantial deposit atop Harry's writing table, then screeched loudly and raced into the murky sky.

Harry held the post close to his face – he had only just realised that he wasn't wearing his glasses. The handwriting on the envelope was precise and familiar. It slowly seeped into him that the poor owl had probably spent a week returning from whence it had been banished. It could have been sent to Australia, for all he knew – he'd been furious at the time, so he'd thrown around a general banishing charm instead of the one intended for owls.

Rap-rap-rap-rap-rap.

"Right... now that's the door," he croaked. The rapping felt as though it was slowly opening a hole in his head. He stumbled across the room, tossed the post atop his bed as he passed, tripped over a side table, stubbed his toe on one of the settee's feet, swore loudly, stopped before the door, and sneered, "Accio wand." His wand struck him in the back before he could turn to reach for it. "Forget it – I'd rather be cursed," he muttered, and assumed the fighting stance Dudley had shown him.

It was an ordeal to clear his throat. "Come in, you great prat!" he bellowed, and gritted his teeth.



The door opened with unnatural smoothness. Professor Detheridge grinned at him, eyes wrinkled nearly into slits under the weight of his brows. He was wearing coal-black trousers and a patterned shirt that Harry couldn't look at without causing his temples to throb; he carried neither robe nor cloak. "You look terrible," Detheridge chuckled.

"What do you want?" Harry snapped, even though it was an incautious approach to adopt toward a new Defence professor – after all, three of the man's five immediate predecessors had turned out to be evil incarnate.

Detheridge held out a shiny flask, similar to Moody's. "It's a housewarming gift. By the time I ran across you last night, it was too late for a sobering charm. Two sips will take the edge off. Three sips will leave you unconscious for a week. I recommend two sips."

"By the time... you..." Harry stood there, slack-jawed, as the previous evening flowed through his mind. He wanted to explain himself, but couldn't think of an explanation that wouldn't give away the Grangers' presence in the Headmaster's chambers. "You brought me back here," he grunted instead.

"Do you remember what I told you, before I left?" Detheridge asked. When Harry nodded slowly, he added, "I meant that – all of it."

Harry looked away, on the off chance that Detheridge was a Legilimens. "Yes, sir."

"We don't stand on formality where I come from," Detheridge said. "I'm Marcus, which makes you Harry – understood? Now... what in the Nine Hells did you do to your arms? You weren't like that when I left you here!"

"There was a problem with the post," Harry deadpanned.

Detheridge laughed. "A problem? Looks to me like a mail owl mauled you! Familiar with battlefield healing charms?"

"I've heard of them," Harry conceded.

"You've heard of them... oh, I forgot how much work we have to do!" Detheridge shook his head. "Get your wand, Harry. We can squeeze in a quick lesson, and still make it to London –"

Harry stared at Detheridge through bleary eyes. "London? Wha...?"

Detheridge looked down at the flask still in his hand. "Oh!" he exclaimed and quickly spun open the cap. "Remember – two sips."

Harry picked up his wand from the floor and slowly stood. He held it over the open flask and muttered, "Toxicum deprendo." There was no telltale blue flash, so Harry took it from Detheridge and downed two quick sips.

Detheridge waited until Harry had swallowed the thick, foul concoction before he observed, "You would have spotted poisons or re-agents, but I could have fed you all manner of foul germs without tripping that charm. In the future, be sure you add aegroris deprendo."

Harry choked, but kept down the potion. It felt like something warm flowed through him, and his head was immediately clearer. "Thank you," he muttered.

"It's important you keep your head, Harry," Detheridge said. "You don't want to be paranoid, but you do want to be careful. So, about those cuts... hold your wand vertically, and we'll have you perform a basic incantation: consanescio. After you speak it, the tip of your wand should glow red; you trace it across the wounds." He examined one of Harry's arms. "If these were deeper, I think we'd go with medela. If you're ever bleeding out, there's always focilare... but that one can be temperamental... best to leave it to someone who heals for a living, unless your back's against the wall." He let Harry's arm fall. "Go on! You don't want to stand there and bleed, do you?"

Harry tried the charm, but his wand tip only flashed red a few times. He stared at it nervously. "I must have said it wrong. Hermione would know how to say it, where to emphasize –"

Detheridge grasped and stilled Harry's wand hand. He shook his head in a friendly way. "Stop thinking about it. If you're bleeding, you say consanescio, and you run your wand tip across the wound. It's like a broom – you don't think about the charms holding it up, you just push off and go," he advised, and then he let Harry's hand free.

Harry stared at Detheridge and then at his wand. "Consanescio," he said, and the tip of his wand exploded in red. A few seconds later, his skin was bloodstained but unmarred.

Detheridge produced the smallest, strangest wand Harry had ever seen. It was no longer than a fresh Muggle pencil and little wider, crafted of a reddish unpolished wood. "Six inches, redwood and horned owl feather," he explained. "Size doesn't equate to power... but you know that, of course." He waved it in a circle, and said "delavo" in little more than a whisper. The bloodstains were instantly washed clean; Harry could see very faint tracings where he had been cut. "May I?" he asked, and reached for the remains of the shirt. With another flick of his wand, and a muttered "resarcio", the shirt knit itself together. "I find resarcio works better on clothing than reparo," he explained offhandedly. "You've probably never thought about a mending spell as something for battle, but it's hard to fight without pants." Harry snorted, and Detheridge appeared puzzled for a moment before his eyebrows shot up. "Trousers!" he exclaimed, and added, "It's always important to remember where you are."

Harry ran the mended shirt through his hands, and then slipped it over his head. "About London...?" he prompted.

"Ah, that. Albus suggested that we ride the student train as a precaution. I thought we could turn it into a lesson." Detheridge's expression became very serious. "You need to learn how to properly conceal yourself."

Harry suppressed a smile, for this played perfectly into his plans. He retreated into his bedroom for fresh trousers. Detheridge told him to tuck his trouser legs into his dragon-hide boots; Shacklebolt had recommended the same once, he recalled. He strapped on his wand holster and his watch, and tucked Hermione's post into his shirt

pocket. It was a few minutes before ten o'clock. "Do we have time for a bit of breakfast?" he asked.

"We need to leave time for the Floo... unless you have a better way of getting around?" At that, Detheridge gave Harry a knowing look that left him absolutely shaky. Since popping wasn't the same as apparation, he imagined that an apparition license didn't actually apply. However, it struck him as a clear advantage that no one save Dobby knew what he could do. He couldn't fathom how Detheridge might have seen him pop, unless he had been spying on the tower house the day that Harry breached the wall.

"Should I Floo from here, or Hogwarts?" Harry asked; he preferred to avoid any sort of direct answer to Detheridge's question.

"We'll head up to Hogwarts," Detheridge answered. "I think I'll Floo with you instead of apparating; it's less stressful. Besides, Albus told me there's a direct connection to the platform."

Harry reluctantly donned one of his old student robes. "You, er, might want to wear a robe," he suggested. "It's sort of expected."

Detheridge grinned. "Of course... remember where you are, yes... I'm not accustomed to robes." He reached into a pocket in his trousers and withdrew an iridescent square of fabric, which he began to shake vigorously. After several shakes, it blackened and took the shape of a voluminous robe. I need one of those, Harry thought immediately.

Downstairs, Madam Rosmerta thrust a sack into Harry's hands. He ate a scone and Detheridge gave an impromptu lecture on concealment as they walked up the path leading to the gates. Harry thought that Detheridge was almost too friendly, too familiar, and he was reluctant to trust any Defence professor that Dumbledore might hire. He settled on giving the man a wary benefit of the doubt, for the time being.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione

Dr. Covelli had told Hermione that she would have more vivid recollection of her dreams, as a consequence of using the Dreamweaver. That had certainly been the case thus far, even when the dreams made little sense. She had developed a habit of lying quiet after she awoke, so that she could take in what she remembered – she learned from what was useful and discarded the rest.

Most of the previous night's dreams were worthy of discarding – they were either muddled or they were about boys. Hermione remained surprised by the frequency with which she dreamed about boys. It wasn't as though her waking thoughts were consumed by them, like Parvati or that tart Lavender Brown. She could appreciate an attractive boy or man, of course, but she had no intention of measuring her worth or marking her days based on anyone else's attentions. Parvati and Lavender had both taunted her with the irony that her two best friends were both boys and were both reasonably fit – Harry was considered a top prospect, especially by exactly the sort of girls he wanted to avoid. Her dreams about boys were nothing like her dreams about Harry or Ron; she didn't equate the two at all. She'd had those dreams for years, and they were too often of the worrying variety.

She had dreamed of being dragged on a date by one of the Weasley boys; the niggling parts were that she couldn't place which one it was, and that Mrs. Weasley pelted them with rice as they left. In any case, the symbolic significance of that dream was clear enough. Then there was an embarrassing little romance-novel dream, in the library with someone – she wasn't certain whom and really didn't care to know. After that was a fuzzy sort of dream about her parents; she remembered that her parents were dining and her dad wasn't acting like himself, and she remembered frayed nerves and guilt.

Hermione opened her eyes. The sun had barely risen behind the clouds – it would be hours before they left to catch the Express. Her left hand was clenched tightly, and she slowly became aware that it was clenched around something. The room was a little blurry, and she worried not for the first time that all of her reading was taking a toll. She had to consciously think of opening her hand. She squinted

at the golden object on her palm for a long time, and then nearly dropped it when she realised what it was. She was holding a Gringotts key, and had no idea whose it was or how it had come to be there.

It took her less than fifteen minutes to ready herself and re-pack her things. Her hair proved to be as advertised; if anything, it required even less care than the Italian cut. She found Hestia Jones seated on a small wooden chair in the corridor.

Jones withdrew a pocket watch from her robes. "It's... barely past six," she yawned. "Why are you up and about?"

"I need to exchange some more money at Gringotts," Hermione explained hastily, "for Hogsmeade trips, extra ingredients for potions... that sort of thing."

Jones stood and sent the chair into nothingness with a flick of her wand. "They opened a few minutes ago," she said. "It's best if we do this early. We'd planned for you to spend the balance of the morning here."

Hermione stood close behind Jones as they descended the stairs to the dining hall. It was nearly empty, but Jones made immediately toward the one red-haired person in the room. Hermione followed with her eyes closed.

Jones leaned over, and Hermione barely heard her mutter, "Hate to intrude, but I need a wand and a pair of eyes. Hermione Granger wants to go to Gringotts before the train comes."

Hermione heard the sound of a bench sliding against the stone floor. "I expect Bill and I could manage that, if you'd rather remain here. He should be here any moment," Mr. Weasley offered.

"I'd be grateful," Jones said. She nudged Hermione's arm. "Hope you don't mind. I was scheduled off at six, but Tonks is running behind. I'll get word to her and be off, then." Hermione nodded dumbly, her eyes still closed.

“We missed you last night,” Mr. Weasley said.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes; he wasn’t scowling, at least. She didn’t know what to say and barely managed, “I guess I made my feelings known, didn’t I?”

“That you did,” he agreed. She was saved from responding by Bill Weasley’s arrival. Bill bantered with someone at the door for a moment, before he looked to them and his eyes widened in surprise.

Bill seized her hands, and kissed her on each cheek; she decided he’d surely picked that up from Fleur Delacour. “Welcome back,” he said quietly. “We’ve been worried sick, you know.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

“I suppose you were smothered last night – Ron and Ginny all over you, Mum dashing over with one of her bone-crushers...” Bill caught the tightness in his father’s face and Hermione’s burning cheeks. “Er... did I miss something?”

“Your mother made some unfortunate remarks to Hermione’s parents prior to their leaving,” Mr. Weasley began.

Bill’s eyes squeezed shut. “That’s a familiar story this summer,” he groaned.

“Hermione here used a time-honoured means to express her displeasure,” Mr. Weasley went on. “It seems that the owl intended to deliver that message was unexpectedly delayed by a few days. As a result, the message arrived last night.”

“Last night... oh!” Bill bit back laughter. “You’re telling me that Hermione sent Mum a Howler, and it turned up here?”

“It took your mother a bit longer to find the humour in it,” Mr. Weasley deadpanned.

“You should have owled me,” Bill sniggered. “Merlin, you should have owled Charlie – could have used his expertise, I’d wager!”

Hermione closed her eyes again. "I wasn't trying to be cruel – I wasn't!" she insisted. "It's just... the things that she said to my Mum... I was so angry!"

Mr. Weasley patted her on the shoulder. "Let's walk, shall we? Bill, Hermione needs to venture out to Gringotts. Do you mind...?"

"There might be time for a bite afterward," Bill said. "If not, we can talk during the week. It'll quiet down once we ship off this lot, eh?"

"I don't want to intrude," Hermione insisted. "I can wait, if you like."

Mr. Weasley looked to the stairs. "It's not a bother," he assured her. "Better that we go now, I think."

Bill was silent as they walked down the Alley; he spent his time glancing at rooftops and the few passers-by. Mr. Weasley seemed as though he was about to say something shortly after they passed through the guards at the barrier, but then fell quiet. Hermione broke the silence. "Mr. Weasley, do you agree with what she said?" she blurted out.

Mr. Weasley stopped walking, which drew a scowl from Bill. "Hermione... sometimes... sometimes the most painful comments are the ones with a spot of truth behind them. Tell me, do you honestly think that I should be heading up the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office?"

"You've done a brilliant job, Mr. Weasley!" Hermione said immediately. "Without you, there would be no Muggle Protection Act –"

Mr. Weasley smiled, but raised a hand to stop her. "I've done what I can, but you didn't answer my question. I want you to be honest now."

"It seems like the perfect post for a Muggle-born," Hermione said quietly.



“It does, doesn’t it?” Mr. Weasley agreed. “I have my post because I’m a pureblood and no other pureblood would sully himself with it. That isn’t just, and it isn’t right, but it is the truth.”

“I see,” Hermione whispered.

“I wasn’t finished,” Mr. Weasley said. “Molly meant well – she always means well...” He sighed. “You have to understand that Molly has sacrificed quite a lot over the years. She could have had a career as a Healer – she was very talented in that way – but she believed that our children had to come first. She believes that a witch makes her mark through her children, you see. I imagine you don’t see your future in the same way?”

“It’s... not something I’ve thought a lot about,” Hermione returned, “but both of my parents are professionals. I was brought up to make my own mark, I suppose...”

“Then that’s what you’ll do,” Mr. Weasley said. “If the Ministry is closed to you, you’ll find your own path. I’m aware of what Molly said about estrangement, and there’s a spot of truth behind those comments as well. I think... I think that she was trying to make your parents see that there would always be a place in the wizarding world that you could call home.”

“That’s not what my Mum heard,” Hermione said.

“No, I suppose not,” Mr. Weasley admitted. “Molly made a right botch of things, and she feels horrible about it. We were getting on rather well with your parents, and I do hope that we’ll have occasion to restore that when... you know, when things have settled.”

Hermione wanted to be snappish, but Mr. Weasley was managing to defuse her. “It might help if my Mum knew that I wasn’t going to be married off in a few weeks,” she offered.

Mr. Weasley turned unexpectedly serious. “It is possible that you’ll receive enquiries as soon as you become of age, but it’s not very likely,” he said. “Most marriages take place without that sort of formality these days. Generally, that’s something you only see of the

old-line families, and we'd be very suspicious if any of those sorts were to approach you. Their reasons might be something less than noble, I'm afraid."

Hermione shivered. "Obviously, I can refuse... I can refuse...?"

Mr. Weasley nodded fervently. "Oh, yes – the days when a witch could be forced into a marriage arrangement are long past. Even childhood betrothals can not be enforced against a witch's will."

Hermione continued to shiver; she felt uncomfortably exposed standing there on the Alley. "Um... can we continue walking? I'd like to get to Gringotts now."

Once inside, Bill led her directly to the exchange desk. She waited until he drifted back to speak with his father. "Are you here to make a currency exchange, Miss?" the goblin behind the desk hissed.

"Yes," she said, startled. "Also, I found a key this morning. It looks like a Gringotts key, and I thought that I should turn it in."

"Key, please," the goblin said in a demanding tone.

She surrendered it. The goblin turned the key several times in his hands, and then began snapping something in Gobbledegook. One of the ornate wooden panels behind the desk opened outward, and a second goblin waddled toward the first. The second goblin withdrew a set of several wire-rimmed lenses from his waistcoat, seized the key, and gave it a scrupulous examination.

The two goblins entered into a snarling exchange. Hermione saw Bill coming from the corner of her eye. The second goblin thrust the lenses back into his pocket, and glared at her. "You will come with me now," he demanded.

"What's this about?" Bill asked.

The second goblin broke into something vaguely resembling a smile, but all the teeth made Hermione think of a dog's smile, which was not a smile at all. "It is a matter between the witch and Gringotts," he said.

Bill moved smoothly beside her, and looked as if he was prepared to put himself between her and the goblin. "She's family," he said in a tone that brooked no opposition.

The goblin's dog-smile grew wider and toothier. "She is not your kin, Weasley. We read the Daily Prophet. We know she is the Granger witch, and this is a matter between her and Gringotts." He crooked a claw-tipped finger toward her. "You will come with me now."

Hermione stilled Bill with her hand. "It's all right," she said. "I've done nothing wrong." She moved past him and nodded at the goblin.

Bill's face was flaming red, and Mr. Weasley was fast approaching. "She's back here in twenty minutes, Rishok, or I'm in Ragnok's office," Bill growled. "I trust we have an understanding?"

The goblin – Rishok – no longer smiled. "This should require little more than half that allotment, Weasley. It would be a great surprise were you to gain the Director's attention within a day's time, so it is in your best interest to remain here. Come, Granger."

Hermione let herself be led through a warren of corridors and open offices filled with goblins and the occasional human doing who-knew-what for who-knew-whom. "All I wanted to do was return a key," she muttered.

Rishok turned his head without slowing the brisk pace. "Gringotts appreciates your forthrightness," he said briskly.

"Are you certain this won't take long?" she asked. "The Weasleys really are like family; I don't want to worry them."

Rishok snorted. "If Weasley believes that Gringotts would harm any being that has personally stood against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, then he is a fool." She stopped walking, and he added, "We do read the Daily Prophet."

Hermione began to follow him again. "You don't like Bill," she observed.

Rishok's toothy smile returned. "He is unnaturally skilled with dice," he snapped.

The goblin knocked on a heavy door in an intricate pattern. After a few moments, the door shuddered and slid to one side. Inside was an office that looked to Hermione as if it belonged in the Stone Age. The desk, or what she assumed to be a desk, consisted of a giant slab of granite perched atop two carved rocks; a third rock appeared to serve as the chair. There were several curio cases, and a stuffed and mounted graphorn's head hung above a second door. Rishok showed her into the office, and strode directly to a well-dressed and particularly saturnine goblin. They snarled and muttered to one another, and Rishok produced the key. The goblin who occupied the office held the key close to his eyes, then looked her up and down and broke into a broad dog-smile. She tried not to quail, and instead turned her attention to the curio cases. Within moments, she wished she hadn't done that; she identified a half-dozen highly illegal objects in plain sight, and wondered why the goblin would be so obvious.

Rishok left, and the senior goblin motioned to a wooden chair that sat before the slab-desk. She seated herself, while the goblin kept his full attention on her. "I am Fliptrask," he said. "The Trust Department at Gringotts is mine. I am the governing trustee for the Potter Family Trust, among other duties. You are Miss Hermione Granger, and that fact earns you several minutes of my inordinately valuable time."

Hermione resolved to consider every word before speaking. "I am honoured that you would take the time, sir," she said. "I was only trying to return a lost key."

"Yes... the key." Fliptrask sat on the rock behind the desk, and placed the key at the centre of the slab. "How did you come by this, Miss Granger?"

"I woke this morning with the key in my hand," she answered honestly. "I have no idea how it came to be there. I haven't an account of my own, but I've seen Harry's key – Harry Potter, of course – and it looks rather like this one."

“Yes, it does,” Fliptrask agreed. “In fact, this is a duplicate of Mr. Potter’s key. This would not be noteworthy except that no one has ever requested or produced a duplicate of Mr. Potter’s key, and it is theoretically impossible to duplicate a Gringotts key anywhere other than in our Key Shop. Rather remarkable – wouldn’t you agree, Miss Granger?”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “I can assure you, sir, that I’ve had nothing to do with any effort to counterfeit a key or anything of the sort!”

“Certainly not, Miss Granger. You lack both the technical skills and the sort of connections that would be required to even attempt such a feat. I do not say this to diminish your accomplishments; no witch of your age and experience could possibly manage it. In addition, you have no motive. You are already an approved party with regard to Mr. Potter’s vault, and thus do not require a key.” Fliptrask’s dog-smile stretched from ear to ear. “You did not enquire as to how I know that this is a duplicate, and not the original key. If you were involved in its manufacture, you would ask the question in some way.”

“I wouldn’t presume to waste your time, sir,” Hermione said. “You wouldn’t possibly give an answer.”

“You were evaluating the contents of my cabinets with evident curiosity,” Fliptrask asked abruptly. “No doubt you were wondering about the particular selection of items? Your thoughts, Miss Granger – why would I choose to display these items?”

Hermione looked at the disturbing curios for a moment, and then returned her eyes to the goblin. “For the same reason that you choose an office that is clearly suited to a goblin, sir – you are making the point to visitors that Gringotts is connected to, but not part of, the wizarding world,” she said in one breath.

Fliptrask pursed his lips. “That is a suitable answer. You are thoughtful and well-spoken, Miss Granger. I find it interesting that the wizards and witches who are most respectful of our time and activities are almost always those who were sired by Muggles or have a fondness for them. There are several thousand million Muggles, and a few million of you; I cannot help but wonder whether we are

allowing great opportunities for wealth to elude us. What do you think Mr. Potter would say to such a statement?"

Hermione tried hard not to appear surprised by the sudden reference to Harry. "He's generally very open-minded. I imagine he would be happy to listen to whatever you might have to say on the matter."

"I developed a similar impression of the young man in the twelve minutes that I spent with him in July," Fliptrask said. "If Mr. Potter were to seek out the management group of this institution for purposes of a brief conversation, we would not be averse to his request."

"I haven't spoken to Harry for some time but I'll be sure to convey your message, sir," Hermione offered.

"Perhaps Mr. Potter might accompany me and others of my station on the hunt," Fliptrask suggested.

Hermione's eyebrows rose despite herself. "I will... be sure that Harry understands the honour you wish to offer him."

"Acceptable," Fliptrask said. He stood, and Hermione understood that the meeting was concluded. He reached across the desk to shake her hand briskly. "Mr. Potter has made an exemplary choice in a companion," he added.

Hermione nearly dropped the goblin's hand. "Companion, did you say?" she squeaked, knowing full well what that meant in goblin terms. "Oh, no, it's nothing like that! Harry is a long-time friend, that's all."

The goblin cocked his head to one side. "It is not customary to offer unfettered access to one's vault unless one is married, affianced or related by blood – not customary at all."

Hermione flinched at the goblin's second reference to Harry's vault. She struggled to say something that wouldn't cause offence. "Harry... is not inclined to behave as other wizards," she managed.

“In general, we take that as a positive attribute,” Fliptrask said. “I would also be remiss if I did not offer my congratulations to you.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry – congratulations? For what, if I might ask?”

Fliptrask seemed unnerved for a moment. “I... am confused as to why you would not know this. It is most unexpected that I should be the first to recognise your accomplishment. In fact, you may wish to consider Gringotts as a future source for employment.” He reached beneath the slab, and withdrew a newspaper. “We do read the Daily Prophet, of course. In fact, we receive it prior to general subscribers.” He opened to the third page, and spread it across the slab:

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## GRANGER SETS NEW STANDARD FOR O.W.L. SCORES

A near-perfect performance for Potter’s partner

Hogwarts student Hermione Granger, 16, has earned the highest score recorded on the Ordinary Wizarding Level (OWL) examinations in more than fifty years, and the third highest ever recorded, according to the Wizarding Examinations Authority. “It was a wholly unexpected accomplishment. We were not prepared to assess such a high level of performance,” said Bronwyn Bester, interim Head of the Authority. Amelia Bones, chair of the Hogwarts Board of Governors and Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, praised the current crop of Hogwarts students and extolled Miss Granger’s performance as proof that the school has maintained a standard of excellence. Madam Bester offered apologies for the delayed announcement of Miss Granger’s accomplishment, and defended the Authority’s rigorous scrutiny of the results as indicative of its commitment to assuring the integrity of the examination process.

Griselda Marchbanks, the immediate past Head of the Authority, resigned her post on August 24 to join the Hogwarts faculty as Professor of Astronomy. Sources within the Authority suggest that Madam Marchbanks’ resignation was in part prompted by the review of Miss Granger’s scores, which the same sources described as

‘unusual’, ‘unprecedented’ and ‘quite barmy, actually’. For more on the rumoured faculty shake-up at Hogwarts, please turn to page 7.

Miss Granger’s close friend, Harry Potter, was unavailable for comment at press time. Mr. Potter’s OWL score for Defence Against the Dark Arts was the highest recorded in 140 years. Mr. Potter’s plans for the fall, in light of his dismissal by the Hogwarts Board of Governors, remain undisclosed. The dismissal was issued after Mr. Potter dispatched several reputed supporters of Voldemort during the course of an unprovoked attack upon Miss Granger’s family home, which occurred earlier this month.

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Her eyes were drawn to the adjacent inset by a glimpse of familiar names. It was a list of the ten highest overall scores ever recorded on the OWL examinations. All had received the maximum number of OWLs, of course:

1. R. Fawcett, Ravenclaw, 1681
2. T. Riddle, Slytherin, 1943
3. H. Granger, Gryffindor, 1996
4. L. de Montmorency, Ravenclaw, 1839
5. G. Stump, Hufflepuff, 1786
6. G. Hipworth, Ravenclaw, 1858
7. (t) A. Lufkin, Ravenclaw, 1770
7. (t) A. Dumbledore, Gryffindor, 1897
9. P.N. Black, Slytherin, 1736
10. L. Evans, Gryffindor, 1976



“Thank you,” Hermione said distantly. “If there’s nothing else, I should be going... wouldn’t want to worry anyone...”

Fliptrask seemed not to notice. “Your efforts are appreciated, Miss Granger.” He took a quill and parchment and scribbled something with a flourish. “Present this at the exchange desk. There will be no transaction fee today, with our compliments. Good day; through the second door, please.”

Hermione drifted beneath the graphorn’s head and through the door into an unfamiliar anteroom, past a bored-looking clerk of some sort, and into the main hall of Gringotts. Bill ran up to her, spouting something about Ragnok and outrage, but she didn’t take it in. The list was all that she could see. It consumed her.

T. Riddle, Slytherin, 1943

H. Granger, Gryffindor, 1996

“Take me back, please?” Hermione requested.

“Are you finished, then? What about your exchange?” Bill asked.

“Just... just take me back,” she whispered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry

Harry stood to the rear of Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ . He spoke to no one, acknowledged no one. Less is more, Detheridge had advised with regard to concealment. Rather than the comprehensive glamour that he had been using, he had merely changed his hair colour to brown with blond highlights and had rendered his skin somewhat paler. Detheridge had charmed Harry’s spectacles to darken. With black robes donned over black trousers and loose white shirt, Harry thought that he presented an image more befitting a Slytherin. Still, he had expected someone to call him out. Instead, the returning students bustled around him – carriages were boarded, trunks were stowed, good-byes were exchanged, and he didn’t draw a second glance.

Detheridge had informed the Aurors and DFDL volunteers that Harry was part of the Hogwarts official detail, and they also ignored him.

Luna Lovegood appeared lost in the crowd, but in point of fact she nearly always appeared lost. He resisted the temptation to greet her; Detheridge was watching him, he knew. He was very surprised when Cho Chang briskly cut through the crowd and approached Luna, with a half-dozen senior Ravenclaws in her wake. Concealment practice or not, Harry resolved to hex Cho and her fellows into October if they made any trouble for Luna. He moved along the platform until he stood within earshot. It was then that he spied the Head Girl pin that adorned Cho's lapel.

Cho set her hand on Luna's shoulder. "Lovegood, may I have a word?" she asked quietly.

Luna took a small step backward. "A witch who approaches a hippogriff without its permission is likely to be bloodied or worse. I learned that in Professor Hagrid's class," she said off-handedly.

Cho let out an exasperated sigh, but let her hand fall to her side. "Look... Lovegood, I'm here to convey our House's regard for you. What you did with Harry... you brought honour to Ravenclaw." When Luna said nothing – merely blinked her big eyes twice – Cho went on, "I also wanted to ask your reasons for declining the position of Prefect."

"Being a Prefect seems like a bother – all that walking around the corridors and opening closets," Luna said. "I wish to be treated no differently than any member of Ravenclaw House."

"You're owed more than that," Terry Boot said.

Luna responded, "I seek nothing."

Morag McDougal squinted hard at Luna. "Lovegood, what's that on your neck?" she asked bluntly.

Luna drew down her high collar to reveal a bright red weal that ran nearly from ear to ear. "This is a curse scar," she said. "Bellatrix

Lestrangle cursed me when she and two of her fellows sacked our flat.”

The assembled Ravenclaws goggled at her. Terry Boot laughed nervously, “Loon... Luna, this isn’t like those Snorkling things you were going on about last year... is it?” Cho muttered something about having seen a mention in the Daily Prophet.

“It was before Hermione Granger’s home was attacked,” Luna went on. “Why don’t you ask Harry about it – he’s right over there.” Luna proceeded to point directly at him.

Harry nearly swore aloud. He cast the first thing he thought of on himself – a Look-Away charm – an instant before Cho’s head whipped around and the other Ravenclaws followed suit. “You mean that fellow over there?” McDougal said dismissively. “Lovegood, that must have been quite a curse you took.”

Luna shrugged. “Things are not always as they seem.”

Cho cleared her throat imperiously. “These are the House prefects for the year, Lovegood. If someone takes your things, if you’re wronged in any way, you’re to come to them – do you understand?” She turned her attention to the group of Prefects. “Twenty points per offence, and I expect all of you to comply.”

McDougal’s eyes bulged. “Twenty points?”

Cho crossed her arms. “Twenty points, Morag. We’ll nip this within the week, and then I’ll see about rewarding those who come to Lovegood’s aid.”

McDougal smiled faintly. “I understand, Cho.”

Cho returned her focus to Luna. “Consider starting a Defence study group for the other fifth years, if Granger doesn’t carry on the D.A. We’ll see to it that it’s well attended.” She nodded smartly, and the Ravenclaw prefects and their leader swirled away into the crowd.

Luna looked directly over Harry's right shoulder and just past his ear. "We'll hold a seat for you," she sing-songed. He watched her skip away, and hoped that Detheridge's attention had been elsewhere.

The Look-Away charm seemed effective – on everyone save Luna, at any rate – and Harry continued to watch the milling crowd. Neville's gran was unmistakeable as she made the barrier; her hat peeked above the assembled students. He noticed that Neville was drawing a very different sort of attention than in years past – the looks thrown his way were of curiosity, not pity. Neville carried himself differently as well, as he had at Gringotts. Harry felt a grim sort of satisfaction that perhaps the Department of Mysteries had benefited one of his friends in a way.

A coterie of redheads came onto the platform at three minutes to eleven. It took Harry several glances to recognise that Tonks was beside Bill Weasley, sporting spiky tomato-red hair. Detheridge caught Harry's eye; rather than greeting the Weasleys, Harry thrust his hands into his pockets. It wasn't until the round of good-byes began and the twins moved aside that Harry spotted Hermione in their midst.

If she hadn't been in the Weasleys' company, he thought that he wouldn't have recognised her, at least not immediately. Her long bushy hair was gone, traded for a cut that was short – as short as his own hair. She had regularly returned from holiday tanned and visibly rested; now she was quite pale. From fifty feet, he recalled the sight of her peering from her bedroom window, when he had waited for Madam Bones to call him inside; she had been almost ghostly then, lost and afraid. He moved closer until Detheridge began to stare at him. From twenty feet, her eyes showed something other than fear; he didn't know what it was that they showed, but it didn't strike him as anything good.

Detheridge sidled up to him and stilled him until all of the students had boarded and the Aurors had assumed their posts at the junctions of several carriages. Then he led Harry into the first carriage, to a compartment next to the one reserved for the Heads and prefects.

"You were seen," Detheridge said evenly.

“That was Luna Lovegood,” Harry explained. “She has a knack for seeing things other people don’t see.”

“Not a bad trait in an ally,” Detheridge observed.

The train slowly pulled away from the platform. Detheridge unpacked several books from a satchel, and made notes as he read on what was surely a Muggle pad of paper using what looked to be a fountain pen. Harry watched London go by, and continued to stare out the window until the grey buildings were replaced by green meadows.

“Do you think your friends can hold their tongues until after we arrive at Hogwarts?” Detheridge asked.

Harry snapped away from the window. “I’m sorry?”

Detheridge kept his eyes on his book and his notes. “You must feel strange right now – neither a student nor a teacher, sitting here with me whilst your friends are assembled elsewhere on the same train. I imagine you’d rather be with them. You understand that Albus would prefer to avoid a fuss until everyone is tucked away in the Great Hall, don’t you? A concealment lesson wasn’t an idle choice.”

Harry sat back in his seat and crossed his arms. “Then why send me at all? Was he trying to make a point?”

Detheridge set down his pen, and met Harry’s eyes. “He concluded that if something happened to the train and you weren’t present, you’d never forgive yourself. As such, I was asked to accompany you. I’d have much preferred to sleep in. Of course, you’d still be laying there in your own blood with a pounding headache, so I guess everything happens for a reason.” He returned to his notes with a snort.

Harry didn’t know whether to be angry that Dumbledore had sent him along with a minder, or pleased that Dumbledore had for once correctly anticipated his feelings. He settled on watching the meadows roll by. The sound of a door opening drew his attention; the Prefects were assembling. When he saw Ron approaching, he made

a point of not looking directly into the corridor. He nearly fell out of his seat when he realised that Parvati Patil accompanied Ron. Where is Hermione? he wondered. Dumbledore wouldn't have taken her badge, would he?

The door to the Prefects' compartment closed and the curtains were drawn. "I know you want to go. Go on, then," Detheridge said. "Just be subtle about it."

Harry didn't pass through the whole of the first carriage before a third or fourth year student gave him an uncomfortably long looking-over. He ducked into the loo as soon as he crossed into the second carriage. The face staring back at him from the mirror just wasn't different enough, he decided. A thought occurred to him, and he stifled laughter. If he was here, I'd have seen him, Harry thought; he definitely would have settled in the first carriage. He closed his eyes, let his mind settle on a particular moment from his night at the Cabaret Molière, and then cast the familiar glamour charm. He gave the mirror a satisfied smile, and then practiced the proper expression for a moment. One thing was readily apparent within a few moments of leaving the loo: taking on the appearance of Severus Snape on a train full of Hogwarts students was more effective than any Look-Away charm ever cast.

On two occasions while walking the length of the train, Slytherin students caught his eye. Harry summoned the foulest look he could recall from Potions class and took on a determined walk; it was a struggle to hold back a grin both times as the students quailed and fell back into their respective compartments. After that, however, Harry was mindful of looking for and avoiding Slytherins of his year or above; he knew that it would be difficult to avoid a terse conversation at minimum, and he wasn't confident that he could mimic Snape's voice for more than a few words.

As he entered the second to the last carriage – without any sign of Hermione, Luna, Neville or Ginny – he very nearly ran into Gregory Goyle. Goyle looked up at him with dazed, red-rimmed eyes. "P-Professor! I didn't mean –"

Harry went rigid. Sneer, I have to sneer! he thought. "Stand aside, Goyle," he barked.

Goyle hung his head. "Yes, Professor," he said. Harry bustled onward with the best swish of his cloak that he could manage, all the while thinking that Goyle looked broken up about something. He crept into a hidden corner just shy of the final carriage, dropped the glamour, and Disillusioned himself.

He saw a number of familiar faces through the glass doors; it seemed as though a good share of Gryffindors had taken up the final compartments, along with a number of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. As he thought about it, he realised that most of the returning D.A. members were here.

The last two compartments were both open to the corridor. One compartment was a crush of sixth years – Neville, Dean, Seamus, Susan Bones, Mandy Brocklehurst – as well as Ginny and Colin Creevey. Hermione sat in the very last compartment of the train. Harry couldn't look at that particular compartment without thinking of Dementors. Only Luna sat with her, and Harry was very surprised to see the two deeply engaged in conversation. The door to the next carriage thumped and Harry pressed himself against the final doorway.

"Cho Chang is a nutter!" Ron bellowed.

Mandy Brocklehurst stuck her head out of her compartment. "She's not that bad... a bit too structured, I'll grant you."

Ron entered Hermione's compartment and threw himself onto a seat. "Timetables for rounds... timetables for making timetables for rounds... and bossy!" He leaned back toward the corridor. "Cho Chang is a bloody timetable!"

"Don't forget, she's also our Quidditch captain," Mandy returned from across the corridor. "We're going to wipe the pitch with you this year."

"Hey! Weasley is our King, and don't you forget it!" Seamus said indignantly, which set his entire compartment into raucous laughter.

Ron shook his head. "No respect at all," he moaned. "All I did last year was win the Quidditch Cup, after all." Luna began to hum 'Weasley Is Our King', which reduced Seamus to a choking fit and caused Ron to instantly turn crimson; even Hermione smiled.

Harry found a comfortable place to lean, and quietly watched. People kept changing places between the carriage's compartments and a number of different people sat with Hermione at various times, but the last compartment was never crowded and remained quieter than the rest. All of the remaining D.A. members took their turns with Hermione except Lavender Brown, who remained seated at the opposite end of the carriage. It seemed orchestrated, and it dawned on Harry after a while that Ron was doing the orchestrating.

Hermione doubtless knew she was being handled – Harry figured that if he could see it, she certainly could – but she voiced no complaints. Luna was the consistent presence with Hermione, and they kept slipping into conversation. Part of Harry wanted to find a way to move closer, to hear what they could possibly be saying to one another, but his better instincts told him that he would be intruding. He continued to watch, until he heard Anthony Goldstein say firmly; "Go back the way you came, Malfoy."

"I wasn't aware that there were reserved carriages, Goldstein," Draco Malfoy drawled. With Goyle distraught and Crabbe presumably off to Azkaban, Harry had figured that Malfoy might skip his usual provocation. Instead he had come with Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode; Bulstrode looked especially surly, Harry thought.

Anthony stood in the doorway to the first compartment and crossed his arms. "Awfully inquisitive, aren't you? Umbridge isn't around to help your lot anymore."

Malfoy gave him a dismissive look and continued down the corridor with a smirk. "My, my... a few houses damaged here, a few people ruffled there, and suddenly everyone's on edge." Anthony instantly put the tip of his wand to Malfoy's nose.



Ron leaped into the corridor with his wand at the ready. Neville was on his heels; he grappled with Ron and insisted, "He isn't worth it!"

"Of course I'm worth it," Malfoy sneered. "Do your worst, Goldstein; it won't be much, I'm sure. Come on, Weasley, I'm sure you want to show off a bit – after all, with Potter out of the way you're the big man in Gryffindor, aren't you?"

Hermione stood, and it took everything in Harry to keep himself from stopping her. She had a strange look in her eye as she turned into the corridor. Her voice was low and cold. "Say what you came to say, Malfoy." Luna followed her closely, and Ginny immediately emerged from the next compartment to flank her.

"Rumour has it you spent your summer in a madhouse, Granger," Malfoy sneered. "Apparently five years as a swotty grind catches up with a person?"

"You know perfectly well what happened to me, Malfoy," Hermione snapped. "You must have read it in the Daily Prophet... or did you get a first-hand account from your father?" Her hands were at her sides, and there was no sign of her wand.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "My father is none of your business."

Hermione advanced, even as Ginny slipped in front of her. She pushed past Ron. "Your father tried to kill my parents and my friends, Malfoy," Hermione said. "Where were you that day, I wonder?"

Malfoy laughed. "Do you think I would actually consider setting foot in your home, Granger? I don't muck out stalls; that's what house-elves are for."

Hermione kept closing on him. "I think you'd do whatever your master told you to do. Perhaps you paid Vincent Crabbe to go in your place?"

"Crabbe was under Imperious," Bulstrode said in a monotone.

"Do you know what happened to Crabbe?" Hermione asked. "My dad beat him with a cricket bat." Parkinson's expression hardened and

she levelled her wand toward Hermione. The corridor filled and a dozen wands shifted toward Parkinson in response; she immediately relaxed her stance. Hermione continued to stand there, seemingly relaxed, and it baffled Harry. Draw your wand, Hermione, he thought.

Neville stepped forward past Ron, until he stood immediately behind Luna. "Why are you here, Malfoy?"

"Just paying my respects to the Mudblood, Longbottom, as if it's any of your business," Malfoy sneered. He glared at Hermione. "You should have run when you had the chance."

Neville bore himself up in a way Harry had not seen before. "Our family vault at Gringotts is number fourteen," he said. "The Browns' vault is number twenty. The Macmillan's vault is on our level, as well. I don't recall ever seeing yours, so I doubt it's lower than sixty. You didn't buy up for it, did you?"

"I see someone drank a Draught of Courage this morning," laughed Malfoy. "Our vault is number eleven, by the way."

"That belongs to the Black family," Neville said.

Malfoy slipped into a fatuous grin. "Precisely."

"That's Harry's vault, then," Hermione said, and Malfoy's face exploded with hate.

"Draco is the rightful heir of the Blacks," Parkinson hissed.

"Spoken like a true gold-digger," Parvati Patil called out from the front of the carriage.

Lavender Brown slid out of one of the forward compartments, wand drawn. "What line do the Parkinsons stem from, I wonder? Funny that I've never seen you at any of the Daughters of the Goblin Wars cotillions, isn't it?"

Hermione began, "Your father is a fugitive, and you've lost your Prefect badge –"

"The Ministry's likely to seize your family's assets," Susan Bones chimed in.

"You have no honour," Neville said coldly.

"So why are you here? Why are you doing this to yourself?" Hermione finished.

Parkinson snapped, "Shut it, Mudblood!"

"I almost feel sorry for you, Malfoy," Hermione said.

"I'd have thought you would have learned your place," Malfoy hissed. "My father –"

"Slapped my father," Hermione finished for him, "and would have killed him if he'd had the chance. He didn't, and that's the only reason you're going to leave this carriage alive."

"I'm sure I didn't hear that correctly, because it sounded distinctly like you were threatening Draco." Parkinson sneered.

"You're dead, Granger – you and everyone like you," Malfoy said coldly.

Ron moved forward in a duelling stance, pressing past Neville, Luna and Ginny to stand beside Hermione. She grasped his wand arm and said, "Don't, Ron – please?"

Malfoy summoned a wicked smile. "How touching! Is it possible? Now that Potter's gone, did the Weasel King finally manage to catch the Golden Bitch?" Several more wands snapped to attention.

Hermione rolled her eyes and laughed, which surprised Harry; every face that Harry could see reflected shock. "Did you spend your entire summer concocting that line, Malfoy?" she asked. Her head shook as she waved her hands at him dismissively and turned toward her compartment.

"You don't walk away from me! No one walks away from me!" Malfoy roared. Harry saw something in Malfoy's eyes, and levelled his wand. As Neville and Ron moved to cover her exit and Ginny and Luna moved into a compartment, Malfoy moved hard to the outside wall of the corridor and muttered something that sounded vicious. A purple flash shot past Ron and over Hermione's shoulder. She gasped and dropped to the floor, and Harry let out a guttural howl.

The windows of the nearest four compartments cracked, and the corridor cleared except for the three Slytherins, Hermione, Neville and Ron. Harry felt a strange stillness in the air. He popped from his resting place, still Disillusioned. A torrent of air burst along the corridor that knocked Ron and Neville to the floor. Harry managed to stop a few feet behind Bulstrode, but his momentum nearly carried him into the door to the next carriage. Bulstrode turned toward the sound, but Anthony Goldstein rolled out of the first compartment and struck her with a curse that Harry had never seen before. Harry cast *everbero* on Parkinson, who was distracted by Bulstrode's fall; her chin snapped back and she collapsed. Malfoy moved to leave the carriage in a panic; he unknowingly charged right at Harry and Anthony. Harry levelled his wand and hissed, "*Catadromarius stranguria!*" His Disillusion fell for an instant, but he managed to re-cast it.

Thick magical ropes wound around Malfoy until he was trussed. One end looped twice between his legs and raced to the ceiling, where it tied itself around a light fixture.

"Wha... let me go!" Malfoy bellowed. With each struggle, the ropes tightened further.

Harry quickly dashed down the corridor, ducking the flailing Malfoy. Hermione lay still on the floor, and he kept seeing the purple flash in his mind's eye. As he neared her, she stood and brushed debris off her clothing. She faced Malfoy with a satisfied smile, and began to walk toward him; Harry retreated ahead of her toward the front of the carriage.

Malfoy continued to fight against the ropes, and they tightened without remorse. He began to howl in pain. Ron flicked his wand and

said “Finite incantatum,” but nothing happened. He tried again, and Malfoy continued to dangle.

“Cancel the spell, Seamus,” Ron said.

“What?” Seamus bellowed.

Ron shrugged. “It’s your style, mate.”

“I didn’t do it! I don’t even know what it is!” Seamus insisted.

Dean held up his hands. “Don’t look at me; I couldn’t do that to another man’s bits, not even to a wanker like Malfoy.” The loops between Malfoy’s legs tightened again, and Dean winced. “Cor, that has to hurt!”

Students hung out the doors of every compartment in the carriage, watching Malfoy’s increasingly grim struggle, but few seemed willing to enter the corridor. “Right then... whoever did this, it’s time to let up,” Ron called out.

Detheridge burst into the carriage, his stubby wand drawn and at the ready; Harry had to press himself against the outside wall of the corridor to let him pass. He stopped for a moment at the sight of the writhing Malfoy and the two unconscious Slytherin girls. “Well, well... this looks like it’ll take some sorting out,” he frowned.

The students watched in rapt silence as Hermione reached Malfoy. “Is it painful? Are you miserable?” she asked with venom in her voice. Malfoy responded by coughing furiously, which made the ropes draw closer still.

Ron gaped at her. “Hermione... you couldn’t have... did you...?”

“Hermione Granger?” Detheridge stopped on Malfoy’s opposite side. “I am Marcus Detheridge, your new Defence professor. That’s a vicious use for a conjured rope – a well-conjured one, I must say. If you’ll release him, we can work this out.”

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir," Hermione said. "My wand is in Professor McGonagall's possession." That explains why Ron was having her looked after, Harry thought, and he wondered why she was wandless.

"Is that so?" Detheridge leaned in to examine the bonds more closely. "Stop struggling, boy," he told Malfoy. "The rope will tighten until it crushes you." Malfoy's eyes bulged, but he continued to move.

Harry stood next to the first compartment and watched Malfoy writhe. Anthony Goldstein was standing not more than two feet away, and Harry thought he looked very satisfied. Anthony raised his hand to his mouth, and muttered, "Look, Potter... I saw you appear for a second. You shouldn't kill him, not with a professor here."

Detheridge walked around Malfoy, over Parkinson, and past Hermione. "If the boy is released right now, there will be no recriminations. If I have to stun him and remove the ropes, I will find out who is responsible and will show very little mercy."

Thankfully the front half of the corridor remained clear. Malfoy was deadly still; it seemed that he had finally absorbed Detheridge's instructions. His breathing was laboured and raspy. Harry put his lips close to Malfoy's ear and whispered, "If anything happens to Hermione – anything – you will die." He walked back to the front of the carriage and cancelled the spell from there; the ropes vanished and Malfoy slammed hard to the floor.

"Thank you," Detheridge said. He returned to Malfoy and knelt. "What's your name, boy?"

"M-Malfoy, sir. Draco Malfoy," he croaked.

Detheridge's face went slack. "Malfoy," he said flatly. "I know your family." He collected a loose wand from the floor. "Is this yours?"

Malfoy looked around for a moment, before he squeaked, "Yes."

"If I were to inspect this wand, would I like what I found?" Detheridge asked.

Malfoy was silent for the best part of a minute, before he muttered, "I'm not sure."

"These two were with you?" Detheridge asked, pointing at the fallen Slytherins.

Malfoy's eyes seemed to cross. "I don't know... it's all dodgy... I... I'm not entirely sure what I'm doing here..."

"Don't embarrass yourself, boy," Detheridge warned. "Pick yourself up, and go to the first car. There's an empty compartment across from the one for the Head students. Sit there and wait for me. I'll take care of these two." Malfoy struggled to his feet, and walked slowly and awkwardly toward the next carriage. Harry resisted the temptation to kick him as he left.

Detheridge waved his wand strangely and then flicked it. "Compunctio," he said. Parkinson and Bulstrode both jumped up as though bees had stung them. "Good afternoon, ladies," he addressed them. "I am Marcus Detheridge, your new Defence professor, and we are not off to a good start. I've sent Mr. Malfoy to sit in the front car. Find him, and wait with him until I come for you. Do it now." Neither had to be told twice.

Detheridge stood and looked up and down the corridor. "Well, we certainly can't leave the train in this condition. Ordinarily, I'd ask whoever was responsible to take care of it, but this is a special circumstance. So... who knows the best charm for glass repair?" Harry backed into the door that led to the next carriage just as the corridor began to fill with curious students.

His former schoolmates were quickly taken with Detheridge. Harry figured there would be no need for anything like the D.A. now, and he was glad for that; everyone needed proper training, he figured. He crouched near the door until Detheridge expressed satisfaction with the repairs and was well on his way to the first carriage, and then picked his way down the corridor and stood just outside the last compartment.

Ron sat across from Hermione, and he looked concerned. "I'm not trying to start something here. We were willing to do whatever was necessary to protect you, but there's no getting around it... that was a stupid stunt. You were three feet from him without a wand!"

"I was fine. He's nothing more than a bully and a coward," Hermione insisted.

Ron's neck was tensing, and Harry knew that the red flush would come next. "He fired a slashing curse at you, for Merlin's sake! Do you want people to believe you've gone mad?"

Hermione shook her head and pointed toward the last doorway. "The spell he cast struck the doorway, there. The stain's barely marred, Ron; that was no slashing curse. Malfoy was simply trying to scare me. That's what he does."

Ron ploughed on. "Then when he was hit with that rope thing, you... you actually enjoyed it. You didn't just want to hex him; you really wanted to hurt him, didn't you?"

"You've wanted to hex Malfoy to death for five years," Hermione snapped. "Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it, Ron!"

"What would you have done to him, then, if you'd had your wand?" Ron demanded.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't have trussed him up like that, if only because I don't know how to do it. I have seen it in a book, though," Hermione returned.

"You really have changed, you know?" Ron said.

Hermione gave a weak shrug. "Ropes wouldn't have occurred to me, actually. I suppose I would have cast *pruritus aegrius* down his trousers."

Ron's eyebrows shot up and he instinctively crossed his legs. "You're scary, Hermione. I know I've said that, but only because it's the truth." He stood. "Look... if you need anything –"



Hermione smiled faintly. "You're a good friend, Ron. I haven't said that as often as I should." Ron left, and she was alone. She balled up an anorak, placed it between her head and the outside wall of the compartment, and closed her eyes. Harry quietly entered and sat across from her. She seemed to relax, and he contented himself with listening to the clacking of the train against the tracks.

"I know you're there; I can hear you breathing," she whispered, and Harry nearly jumped out of his cloak.

"Hello," he whispered back as soon as he settled himself. "Are you all right?" She had dark circles beneath her eyes, he noticed, and she seemed even paler than on the platform at King's Cross.

He had to strain to hear her. "No, but I will be," she said. "I recognised the ropes straight away, from Scandalous Tactics. Liked that book, did you?"

Harry snorted softly. "I didn't know if it would work. I just blurted it out."

"You're not supposed to be here, are you?" she whispered.

"Not exactly," he answered quietly.

She relaxed against the wall again. He wanted to do the same, but knew that he definitely shouldn't be found out, not after what had happened. Detheridge is going to eat me for dinner, he was certain.

Hermione stretched, and repositioned the anorak. "You'd better go before someone sits on you," she whispered.

He rose from the seat, and cursed himself for having neglected to silence his breathing, his robes or his footfalls in the first place. She sat up and reached out; her hand brushed against his leg. "Thank you, Harry," she said quietly. "I'd like to see you soon; tonight, if that's all right."

"I'll try," he said.

Harry was in no hurry to reach the front carriage of the Express. Detheridge was going to lay in to him for certain, and his brief time with Hermione had left him very much on edge. It wasn't like her to leap into the unknown unless pushed, usually by him or Ron. He couldn't reconcile that with the sight of her standing three feet from Malfoy – without her wand – and provoking him into a rage. There had been a dozen or more wands trained on Malfoy; if Harry had stayed with Detheridge, then Malfoy would have been hexed instead of crushed, but Hermione would still have left unscathed. He wondered why she had been so reckless, and he wondered why she wanted to see him that night. He wanted to talk to her about her parents' decision, and it was best that he get that out of the way very soon. She hadn't said 'meet me tonight in the Common room' or 'come to the Room of Requirement'; she'd asked if he might see her. It was nice of her to ask, he thought – he actually appreciated it – but it was one more thing about Hermione that seemed off.

Detheridge's compartment was closed, and the blinds were drawn; Harry presumed that it was silenced as well. Malfoy sat one compartment behind, alone. He shifted uncomfortably from one position to the next as Harry watched him. His robe lay beside him; he was wearing a half-sleeved white shirt and jerkins. Rope burns trailed across both his forearms. If Malfoy had taken the Dark Mark, then it was located somewhere else.

The door to Detheridge's compartment opened, and Harry backed away. Bulstrode and Parkinson emerged, and the door quickly closed behind them. Parkinson was deathly pale, while Bulstrode looked furious. They scuttled into Malfoy's compartment; none of them showed the presence of mind to cast an Imperturbable charm against the door, and he figured none of them knew how to create a silent space. Harry withdrew an Extendable Ear from one of his pockets and slipped it under the door. He then leaned against the door, which hid all but an inch of the Ear from the view of any potential passer-by.

"He knows things," Parkinson whispered, "things he shouldn't possibly know!"

“He knows things about my family that no one knows – at least until now,” Bulstrode fumed. There was a pause, before she added menacingly, “Anything comes back to me and I’ll know where it came from, Parkinson.”

“It wasn’t Legilimency,” Malfoy said flatly.

“How would you know?” Parkinson asked.

“My father made Snape use it on me; I’ll never forget how that felt,” Malfoy returned. He sighed loudly. “I’ve been telling you to avoid Dumbledore’s eyes since second year, and you didn’t know why?”

“Then we’ve been ratted out,” Bulstrode growled, “and not just once. Nobody from the Squad could have known all of that... except you, Malfoy.”

“Stop thinking; it doesn’t become you,” Malfoy sneered. “If I’d decided to give you all up, I assure you that I wouldn’t be sitting here.”

“You’re good at keeping up appearances,” Parkinson snapped.

“This is all your father’s fault, so shut it,” Malfoy whispered forcefully. “If my father was still seated on the Board of Governors, we wouldn’t be stuck with that right bastard for a professor.”

Parkinson’s voice grew louder. “No, Malfoy, this is all your fault. Did you listen to me when I said we shouldn’t waste our time messing about with Granger? No, of course you didn’t listen! I guess you forgot that it was your father who turned her into a heroine of the unwashed masses? I’ll wager she’s got three houses standing up for her now, and some of us are going to have to play nicely if we plan to salvage any credibility –”

“Another year and it won’t matter what they think,” Bulstrode sneered.

“That’s one possibility,” Parkinson said. “The other is that a year from now, the Dark Lord is dead and we’re stuck with Dumbledore as Minister and Potter as hero of the bloody realm, which would leave most of us taking turns dishing ice cream at Fortescue’s.”

“Planning to play both sides against the middle, are you? Like father, like daughter,” Malfoy mocked.

“Wouldn’t you prefer that your father had done the same?” Parkinson asked. “There’s only one possibility left to you now.”

“There’s always more than one possibility,” Malfoy said confidently.

There was a long silence, before Parkinson offered, “I have an ampoule of unction in my trunk. It’ll soothe those burns.”

“Who conjured those bloody ropes, anyway?” Malfoy snapped. “Someone’s going to pay for that!”

“It wasn’t Granger,” Bulstrode grunted.

“Don’t be so sure,” Parkinson returned. “She sounds serious about killing you, Malfoy.”

“She does, doesn’t she?” Malfoy said quietly. “I want to know what happened to Granger after the Daily Prophet went and declared her Queen of the Mudbloods, and I’m not interested in the usual rumours. There’s something off about her, something different, and I’m not referring to the hideous mop of hair she used to wear.”

“You think there’s really something worth knowing?” Parkinson asked.

“I don’t know... but I’m not about to leave a Galleon lying on the walk,” Malfoy said.

“Like Granger said, ask your father,” Bulstrode said.

Malfoy hissed, “That’s the last thing I’d do! You know I haven’t spoken to him in a long time. If he comes for me now, then you’ll be right, Parkinson – I’ll be down to one possibility.”

Harry heard movement inside the compartment; he quickly coiled the Extendable Ear and scuttled to one side until the three Slytherins had passed. So... it looks as though Bulstrode’s a Death Eater, Parkinson

isn't, and Malfoy might actually be undecided, he thought. There were at least two surprises in that. Before he could slip into the empty compartment, Detheridge's door opened. Harry didn't want to go in, but he was certain that the door had opened for a reason and that it was best to have it out immediately. He entered the compartment, closed the door behind him, and cancelled the disillusionment.

"Subtle," Detheridge said.

"No, sir, I wasn't," Harry admitted.

"The word refers to attaining an end via indirect means, marked by guile and cunning..." Detheridge began to rummage through his knapsack. "No, 'subtle' certainly doesn't square with what happened back there."

"Look... I had to protect her. Malfoy was —" Harry began.

"Oh, is that what you were doing...? A-ha! I knew I'd brought it along!" Detheridge held out an uncomfortably familiar book. "Shall I locate the appropriate section, or have you committed those particular page numbers to memory?"

"Chapter eight," Harry mumbled.

"I love this book, always have," Detheridge said lightly as he turned the well-worn pages. "About two-thirds of it is either unworkable or foolishly dangerous, but I'll give de Maupassant his due for sheer style... and some of it is actually damned impressive. The man is a genius... and here we are. Number twelve... catadromarius stranguria."

Harry never had the slightest chance. Detheridge had tossed off the incantation as though he was simply reading it aloud from the book, and had artfully concealed the flick of his wand. Harry found himself upside down and flailing, and then very quickly trying not to repeat Malfoy's mistake.

"Good! You're a quick study," Detheridge snapped. He set the book down face-up directly in Harry's view. "Hurts, doesn't it? You

seriously insulted the Malfoy boy back there, and I'm betting that you had no idea why. Do you understand why this little rope trick belongs in a book with 'scandalous' in the title?"

Harry wanted to shout, but he knew what would happen if he did. Instead, he measured his breathing and bit out, "I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"In a world where bloodlines matter, what is truly important to the eldest son of a family?" Detheridge asked.

"Living long enough to inherit?" Harry managed to say.

"That's a given, but you've started up the right path," Detheridge said. "You survive, you get the money, and you pass along more money to your own eldest son instead of leaving it to your brother's brat. Fertility, Harry – it's as important as money to old wizarding families. Read aloud, from the top of the right hand page – now."

Even though Harry was moving very little, even the small rise and fall of his chest was encouraging the ropes to constrict. He didn't want to read aloud, but he wanted out of the ropes and it surely looked like the quickest means to that end. He was swaying a little, so he squinted to keep the words in focus. "If you are made into a cuckold against your will, number twelve is the best revenge. It is made all the more delicious when your transgressor stands to claim his family's seat of honour. In a bare hour, you can end the man's line; if he has not yet claimed the seat of honour, you may even have the pleasure of thwarting his climb altogether –" He had no idea what a 'cuckold' was, but the general meaning of the passage was clear enough.

Detheridge cut him off. "If the poor wretch thrashes enough, it doesn't take an hour. Malfoy's family may be dubious at best, but he still stands to lead it. Skip a few paragraphs... read from here." He planted his index finger near the bottom of the page.

Harry was afraid to clear his throat. "For a particularly wicked revenge," he read, "conceal your identity from the transgressor. He will be unable to affect the direction of his fury, and will reap his

reward in mere minutes.” He added uncomfortably, “I don’t remember that part, from when I read the book.”

Detheridge picked up the text, and looked through it for something. “Perhaps you have an earlier edition,” he suggested. “Now then... ‘he will be unable to affect the direction of his fury’... there’s an important clue in that for learning how to get out of most of the Marquis’ little rope tricks.”

“A clue... what? You’re going to make me get out of this bloody thing myself?” Harry growled. The ropes quickly tightened, and he immediately wished that he’d kept his mouth closed.

“Angry with me?” Detheridge asked.

“Yes!” Harry seethed through clenched teeth. He barely breathed, barely moved, but the ropes tightened. “Bloody...!” It was like being kicked, he decided – by several people at once.

“Control yourself and think,” Detheridge said quietly. “You know that I cast the ropes. It’s true that the ropes are ‘conjured’, but it’s just as accurate to describe them as ‘cursed’.”

It was difficult, but Harry managed to slowly relax one part of his body at a time until he hung limp. The ropes loosened somewhat, enough that the pain receded and his thoughts came to the fore. If I didn’t know that Detheridge had done this, then I couldn’t ‘affect the direction of my fury’, but why would I want to affect it? he wondered. When he pushed me, when I got angrier, the ropes tightened – even when I wasn’t moving. Is that the difference between ‘conjured’ and ‘cursed’?

He could see the Department of Mysteries again; Bellatrix Lestrange was mocking him for his failed Cruciatus Curse, telling him that he had to mean it. Detheridge didn’t mean it, Harry realised – he was teaching a nasty lesson, but no more so than Shacklebolt’s first session at Grimmauld Place. The ropes weren’t intended to injure; they had loosened when he relaxed. I’m not truly angry with Detheridge, he told himself. I cast this on Malfoy and I didn’t

understand it. I didn't need to cast it, even though I wanted to do it; I didn't need to do anything at all, really...

"I'm not angry with you," Harry told Detheridge. "You're not trying to hurt me. I wasn't thinking when I set after Malfoy with the ropes." The bindings sagged and Harry's legs dropped loose. He didn't waste any time; before they could possibly tighten again, he wriggled free and threw them across the compartment.

Detheridge returned Scandalous Tactics for Duelling to his knapsack. "Well done," he said casually. "Snape was wrong about you; you're prepared for advanced studies."

"Snape?" Harry spat. He was certain that he saw the ropes suddenly wriggle in the corner, and bit back the rest of his thought.

"He seems to believe that you can only act on impulse... come to think of it, I don't think he's described anyone as anything but a mindless twit." Detheridge snorted. "Strange man, that Snape. You are impulsive – find me a teenager who isn't – but there is a working mind inside that head of yours. Most of any given battle is waged with the mind, Harry, not with a wand or a sword or a staff."

Harry's eyes locked on the ropes; they were definitely shaking. "Erm... could you get rid of those things?"

"They'll fade away when you allow it," Detheridge explained. "Nasty things, very nasty... I'd love to ask the man what possessed him to create ropes that feed off the victim's emotional state."

Harry forced himself to turn away from them, and to change the subject. "Have you arranged a time for our sessions?" he asked. "Dumble... er, the Headmaster is setting a timetable."

"Oh, we'll meet here and there," Detheridge said dismissively. "I find that fixed times rarely work out for me. It's enough trouble to organize a full load of regular classes. I might ask Albus if I can put you to work with the younger students, and... and..." His eyes suddenly glazed over.



“Are you all right?” Harry asked immediately.

Detheridge’s face was vacant. “Just... one of those things... overtaxed myself the last few days... a glass of water will... yes, a glass of water...” He withdrew a handkerchief from somewhere and mopped his brow with it. “See you at the castle,” he mumbled, and abruptly walked out of the compartment.

Harry closed the door before anyone could steal a look inside. I can be subtle, he fumed. Resolving to stay sealed inside the compartment for the rest of the journey, he closed his eyes and savoured the sensation of an easy breath. When he opened them again, the ropes had faded away.

The grey skies became darker and more turbulent as lush meadows gave way to steep Scottish hillsides. Raindrops streaked the windows by the time the Express switched onto the last leg of track that took them to Hogsmeade. Detheridge still had not returned to the compartment when Harry felt the train begin to slow. Detheridge had left behind his knapsack. Harry took it up, opted for a Look-Away charm and a raised hood, and dashed to the foot of the carriage during a lull of activity. The train was rolling at a snail’s pace when the first Aurors hopped off the train to the platform, and Harry followed suit. Hagrid had taken up his usual place to await the disembarking first years. McGonagall also stood on the platform, a black umbrella raised stiffly above her head.

Harry watched the great scramble from the train to the thestral-drawn carriages. Owls hooted and screeched, cats slunk around the ankles of rushing students, and Hagrid bellowed, “Firs’ years over here!” It was more of a drizzle than a rain now; Harry could recall worse years to be consigned to the boats. He watched his old life push past him in a great teeming mass; Ron’s head was barely visible from within a knot of sixth-years. McGonagall fished Hermione from the crowd and spirited her to a carriage waiting behind the station house.

The Aurors seemed more focused on the students than the platform, so Harry recast his disillusionment and scrambled after McGonagall; he managed to hoist himself onto the footman’s step just as the thestrals started forward. McGonagall’s carriage raced ahead; they

were through the gates and on the winding drive to the castle well before the first students began their rides.

Harry watched through the windows as McGonagall produced Hermione's wand from within her robes. Hermione took it; she looked upset and began to exchange words with the professor. McGonagall seemed to let forth with long gales while Hermione fired back in short bursts. If it had been he and Ron, Harry wouldn't have described it as an outright fight, but with McGonagall and Hermione he wasn't so sure. He couldn't hear Hermione's voice over the din of the wheels and the unexpected clacking of the Thestrals' hooves, but McGonagall's burr carried through the doors now and again: "...endangering yourself... her motives are far from noble in this... you should never have... we all care... that simply isn't true... ten points..."

They seemed to settle back for a moment, but then Hermione shouted something unintelligible and McGonagall's voice sliced through the sounds of the carriage rumbling along the pebbly path. "...the same mistake... wrong road for the right reasons... perhaps I should have held your wand a while longer?" Hermione's hands waved and her head shook; she was red-faced and furious.

The carriage stopped quickly, and Harry had to grab hard for a hand rung to keep himself on the step. Hermione flung the door open and it nearly slammed into him. She leapt from the carriage wide-eyed and wand drawn, and stared up at the castle in the oddest way; it was almost as though she was trying to ward it off, he thought.

McGonagall leaned heavily against her staff as she clambered down. "You bear the same obligations as any other student of this school, and you are subject to the same disciplinary standards. I do hope you weren't thinking otherwise when you resigned your post as Prefect; if so, then you have miscalculated," she snapped.

Hermione whirled, and her hands went to her hips. "I'm not threatening them; I'm telling you that I won't be threatened again. I behaved as you asked, and Malfoy would have happily killed me if someone hadn't stepped in. If I'd had my wand, I wouldn't have stood for it." Harry almost flinched at the anger in her eyes. Her hands were

shaking. "You tell... you tell Professor Snape that if they come after me again, there will be a price paid for it," she finished.

McGonagall's face fell. When she spoke, it was in a very formal way. "It is my opinion that you are not ready to be in attendance, Miss Granger. It is my duty to report that impression to the Headmaster; I dearly wish that I could do otherwise." She inclined her head toward the doors. "If you will be remaining here, I think it best that you affect a gradual return. Your present temperament is not suited to the Welcoming Feast. The password to your Common Room is 'fortune favours the brave'. The house-elves will provide you a meal."

Hermione put away her wand, rushed up the steps and ploughed inside without a look back. McGonagall clung to her staff as though she was being buffeted by a sharp wind; she appeared unthinkably close to tears. I've cocked up twice in twenty-four hours; why not go for a third? Harry figured. He let his disillusionment fall. "Are you all right, Professor?" he asked.

McGonagall's hand clutched at her chest. "Where did you come from?"

The impulse to gaze at his own feet was too powerful to resist. "I just left the train; the Headmaster sent me along with Professor Detheridge to ride... well, to ride with the students." He laughed nervously. "It's passing strange to put it that way."

"I imagine it is. So, Potter... you were on the train?" she said slowly. "How long have you been standing there?"

Harry shuffled his feet. "Long enough," he admitted.

McGonagall nodded gravely. "I see. Was there something that you needed?"

"No, I just wanted to be sure that you were all right," Harry said, and thrust his hands into his pockets.

McGonagall sighed. "It's very difficult to watch someone..." She trailed off and didn't finish the thought.

"I'll be speaking to her later," Harry offered.

McGonagall looked at him with a sad, strange smile that reminded him of the looks he received from the portraits throughout the castle. "Thank you for asking after me, Po... Harry. It says something about the sort of person that you are, something very good." She repositioned her staff and began to climb the steps. Harry quickly put out his arm; she hesitated for a moment and then took it until they reached the top.

"You wait for the first years here, right?" Harry recalled.

"The tradition begins at these doors, as it always has," she said quietly. The lights from the first-years' boats stood out against the dark horizon.

At the sound of the approaching student carriages, he opened the door. The realisation that he was expected to sit with the staff at the head table struck him soundly, and he hesitated there. "Get yourself to the Great Hall," McGonagall said. "Please meet me in the anteroom following the Feast; there is additional information that the Headmaster wishes me to pass along."

Harry hesitated for a moment at the foot of the main stairs, but he knew that he couldn't go chasing after Hermione. He continued to wonder what had gotten into her; the wondering led him down a path that he wasn't prepared to walk, not until after the Feast at any rate.

## Chapter Thirty-two

### SING A SONG THAT SOUNDS LIKE LIFE

The Great Hall was empty and spotless, awaiting the arrival of the students. Scores of candles floated over the four long House tables, as always; the golden plates and goblets were just so; the ceiling was a bit gloomy, but one end had cleared off to reveal twinkling stars set against a sky of deep purple. Detheridge was seated at the staff table; he looked to be joking with Flitwick, but Harry thought he looked a bit ashen. Flitwick was holding the Sorting Hat, and positively rolling with laughter. Croaker came out of the anteroom; he spied Harry and tipped his hat before seating himself to Flitwick's left.

Mrs. Tonks – Professor Tonks, Harry thought – walked up beside him. “Are you nervous? I can imagine how you might be nervous, what with all of your classmates still attending, not to mention having to sit up there at the table, everyone staring and pointing and –” She stopped to take a breath and shuddered. “I couldn't be more nervous; I suppose that's obvious.” Her hands never stopped moving; she picked at the skin that surrounded her fingernails.

Harry surveyed the room, which seemed to have closed in a bit. “I'm sure everything will be fine, Professor Tonks,” he managed.

“Oh, Harry, you must call me Andromeda. I never want to hear you call me ‘Professor’! I'm not ready to answer to that, I can tell you!” Mrs. Tonks burred on. “I don't care for crowds, you know – I don't suppose that Nymphadora mentioned that, did she? – but I'll muggle through... that is to say, I'll muddle through! Oh, dear me...”

The room had definitely shrunk, Harry decided. “We should sit; sitting would be a good thing,” he croaked.

Harry walked as quickly as possible past Snape, who had swirled in and promptly taken his customary seat at one end. “You will sit in the last seat, Potter,” he sneered, and pointed to the far end of the table. “Apprentices should be required to take their meals in the anteroom.”

Mrs. Tonks shook her head at Snape. "Severus, I'm beginning to wonder if the rumours about you might be true," she said with a sigh, and moved on before the Potions Master had an opportunity to respond.

Harry stopped at Detheridge's place, and deposited the abandoned knapsack atop the table. "You left this behind, Professor," he said.

Detheridge looked blankly at Harry and then at the knapsack. "Mine, is it?" He opened it, rifled through the contents and smiled slightly. "Yes, of course... thank you... erm..." Harry mumbled something and proceeded to the far end of the table, wondering about Dumbledore's taste in Defence professors and questioning Shacklebolt's tutorial recommendations as well.

Mrs. Tonks followed him. He couldn't look at her any longer without thinking of Tonks, and he didn't want to feel guilty anymore. "You don't have to sit beside me, Prof... Andromeda," he offered.

She looked along the length of the table. "It looks as if I'm either beside you or Severus. I spent seventeen years of my life amongst people like him, Harry; that was quite long enough." She added with a small smirk, "You know, I expected you'd ask about those rumours straight away."

A few of his darker experiences with Snape rose to the surface of Harry's thoughts. "Rumours can't be any worse than the truth," he decided. Mrs. Tonks raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Dumbledore's and McGonagall's seats at the centre of the table remained empty; as did the seat between Mrs. Tonks and Professor Marchbanks. The doors at the far end of the Hall swung open, and the returning students began to flood inside. It was a full ten seconds before a knot of younger Gryffindors looked to the staff table and froze in place. Within moments, half of the Hogwarts student body was standing stock-still and staring at Harry as the other half struggled to enter.

Cho Chang's voice rang out from the doors. "Move along! What's the meaning of this —" She caught sight of him and her eyes widened;

Harry couldn't tell if it was out of shock or fright. He contemplated crawling under the table, but settled for half-heartedly waving at her. She waved back in a daze and then cocked her head to the side, as though she wasn't quite certain what she was seeing. After a moment, she abruptly returned to herding her fellow students to their places.

Harry turned his attention to Flitwick, who was again laughing loudly at the Sorting Hat, until he heard a sharp hiss from across the Hall. Malfoy stood at the far end of the Slytherin table, fists balled at his sides. Parkinson was next to him, apparently in shock. Bulstrode was with Nott and two seventh-years that Harry recognised but couldn't name; she began to violently mouth something, and Harry was pleased that he could not hear her.

Mrs. Tonks bumped his arm. "That must be Eddie Parkinson's daughter; the poor girl has his nose. She doesn't look pleased to see you, does she? For that matter, my dear nephew looks positively surly."

"Nothing new in that," Harry said. He reached for his goblet and raised it slightly in Malfoy's direction, which drew a vicious glare.

Mrs. Tonks pursed her lips. "Draco lacks direction; it's no wonder, given his circumstances. I'll be watching him closely."

The students continued to push in, and the usual hubbub died at the door. The seats at the near end of all four House tables were very slow to fill. A group of younger Ravenclaws were forced forward by the crush of entering students; they stood there and just stared at Harry. He felt like a classroom experiment gone wrong under their gaze. After a moment, he scowled at them and they quickly found seats.

"Oi, that's Harry up there!" Dean Thomas called out, which provoked nervous laughter from the Gryffindors already seated. Harry's year-mates pushed forward; Dean and Seamus plunked down in the first seats, while Parvati and Lavender blocked off several seats opposite them.

Ron kept walking past the House table, with Neville in tow. He reached up, hand extended to Harry, and said, "Good to see you, mate!"

Harry stood and leaned across the table to take Ron's hand. "Thank Merlin someone is," he whispered forcefully.

Neville thrust his hand forward. "I don't understand it, but I'm awfully glad to see you here," he said. "Did you, er, hear what happened on the train?"

Ron smiled crookedly. "Somehow I think he knows all about it, Neville."

"Thanks for coming up here," Harry said to Neville as they shook hands. He looked up to see Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati and Ginny all waving madly, and couldn't help but indulge a grin.

Mrs. Tonks took up her wand and gave it a shake. "Five points to Gryffindor seems appropriate to me. Good show, boys."

Ron blushed. "Er... thank you, Professor... um...?"

Croaker abruptly turned away from Flitwick. "Neville, my boy! Goodness, but it's been too long!"

In a trice, Neville seemed to shrink into a tentative third-year. "G-G-Great Uncle Algie!" he stammered. "I d-didn't see you there... G-Gran never said anything about —"

"Straighten up, would you?" Croaker huffed. "You're a friend of Mr. Potter, then?"

Neville stood there frozen, and Harry decided to jump in with both feet. "Neville is one of my closest friends," he said. "He's a good man in a pinch. Of course, you should know all about what he did in the Department of Mysteries... shouldn't you?"

Croaker's face was round and inclined to a jovial look; this made his darkening eyes particularly startling. "I know a great many things, Mr.



Potter, and there are other things about which I know far too little and desire to know much, much more,” he said tonelessly.

Before Harry could say anything else, Dumbledore made his entrance from the anteroom. “Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Weasley, it’s a pleasure to see you both well and ready to begin another year. Thank you for approaching the table,” he said, and smiled broadly at both of Harry’s friends. “Now... would you gentlemen be so kind as to take your seats?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Neville said quickly. He flopped down across from Dean and Seamus; Ron looked up and down the table for someone – most likely Hermione, Harry figured – and then sat next to Neville and Ginny.

Dumbledore slowly made his way along the table as the students continued to take their places. He patted Harry on the back of the shoulder, and said, “All seems to be going well thus far, wouldn’t you agree?” Harry debated an answer, glanced down the table toward Croaker, and instead silently nodded and took his seat

The Headmaster next stopped behind Flitwick and Croaker. “Is the hat telling jokes again this year, Filius?” he asked.

Flitwick laughed. “I’ve never seen it in such a state, Albus; it simply won’t stop!”

Croaker nodded. “The one about the troll, the hag and the leprechaun going into the bar... ah, that’s a corker!”

The man laughed loudly, as though he hadn’t tried to stare a hole through Harry moments before. He had come from the Department of Mysteries, and seemed old enough to be the same Croaker who had captured the cognivores more than a century before. Harry suspected that Croaker was the one who had provided Dumbledore with the binding curse cast on Hermione; that meant he was also likely responsible for the runes appearing on Harry’s hand, despite Dumbledore’s opinion on the matter. Now it turned out that he was Neville’s Great Uncle Algie – who, if Harry remembered correctly, was the one that had tossed a very young Neville from a window to

see if he was magical. Harry was now quite certain, even more so than after the staff meeting, that the man was dangerous – now it was a matter of figuring out to whom Croaker was a danger.

Dumbledore put his hand to his chest, but he was still smiling. “Oh, my... and with such tender ears about! I shall have to give it a good talking-to!” At that, the hat began to say something that Harry couldn’t make out. Dumbledore’s smile fell away; he took the hat from Flitwick, and proceeded to have a very animated whispering conversation with it. He carried it with him to the centre of the table, set it down, and raised his hands in the air. The enchanted sky seemed to respond to him; the last of the gloom faded away and the stars brightened.

“Welcome to all of you!” he said brightly. The last students slid into their seats, and the din from their chatter quickly faded away. “As you have doubtless concluded, we have a great many announcements to make this evening – so many, in fact, that I believe I will break with tradition and speak whilst you partake of the evening’s feast.” He was met with a smattering of applause at that. “Prior to that, of course, our new first years must take their places.” His eyes took on a familiar twinkle. “The Sorting Hat has informed me that it wishes to conduct the sorting prior to singing its song... and who am I to argue with a hat?”

As if on cue, the doors of the Great Hall re-opened and Professor McGonagall led the line of first years toward the front. Harry thought that they seemed exceptionally young, and that there seemed to be fewer of them than normal. They appeared every bit as anxious as he remembered from his own sorting. McGonagall walked to the table, and Dumbledore held out the hat to her. The Hat said something; her eyebrows rose for a moment, and then she conjured a four-legged stool upon which the Hat was placed.

She unrolled a parchment scroll, and said to the assembled first years, “When I call out your name, you will place the hat upon your head and sit on the stool. The hat will announce your House, and you will then proceed to the appropriate table. Is that understood?” A few of the first-years managed to nod; the rest looked as if they preferred to hide.

The Sorting Hat quickly dispatched Lisbet Adams to Hufflepuff, Moira Armstrong to Ravenclaw and Edmund Blackadder to Slytherin. McGonagall cleared her throat, and called out, "Blitz, Alistair!"

A dark-haired boy slowly edged forward from the rest of the first-years, and reluctantly slipped the hat over his head. There was a pause, and the boy began to fidget before the hat shouted, "HUFFLEPUFF!" The boy's eyes squeezed tightly closed and he let out a long rattling sigh. After a few moments, he set the hat back on the stool and trudged off to the Hufflepuff table.

Harry was certain that he'd seen the boy before, but couldn't place him. He found himself watching the reactions of the House tables rather than paying attention to the sorting, until McGonagall said, "Davies, Laura!" With those two words, he remembered both the new Hufflepuff and the blond-haired girl who smiled at him as she walked to the stool; it seemed to him as if a hundred years had passed since he'd given broom rides in Diagon Alley. The hat lingered for a long time, and he wondered if it was talking to her. It quivered, and then shouted out, "GRYFFINDOR!"

She nearly jumped off the stool, and tore the hat from her head. "Is it... is it certain?" she asked hoarsely.

McGonagall wrested the hat from the girl's clenched fists, and told her firmly, "Be seated with your House, Miss Davies." Parvati rose from her seat and led the shaken girl to the table, where she slumped down between Lavender and Natalie McDonald.

Harry didn't recognise any more of the first-years, though he supposed it was possible – even likely – that others of them had taken rides with him on his Firebolt. He wondered why Laura Davies had been so bothered by her sorting; perhaps they're like the Weasleys, but with everyone in Ravenclaw, he thought.

It wasn't long before "Yonge, Donald!" was sorted ("RAVENCLAW!"), but the students were positively restless. Ron was fiddling with his fork; Lavender and Parvati were twittering about something or another; and Neville was trying as hard as he could to avoid looking

at the staff table. McGonagall held the Hat before her, and looked at it crossly.

Dumbledore stood. "Does the Hat still wish to regale us?" he asked. "We could substitute the school song, if it wishes."

McGonagall walked slowly toward the table. "The Hat is behaving very oddly," she whispered forcefully. "I must recommend that we forego the demands of tradition –"

"I shall sing," the Hat announced loudly enough that a good share of the students could hear. Buzzing conversations fell to whispers and then to nothing at all. McGonagall placed the ancient wizard's hat onto the stool. The whole school waited in silence, as the rip near the hat's brim opened wide:

A thousand years or more ago,

When I was newly sewn,

There lived four wizards most ribald,

Whose names are still well known:

Bold Gryffindor, a ladies' man,

And Ravenclaw, fair wench,

Oh Hufflepuff! – saucy and tan,

Slytherin favoured French –

"Stop that at once!" McGonagall roared.

"I merely speak truths long forgotten!" the Hat shouted, and then it resumed singing:

The truth shall not be hidden here,

Wizards and witches fair –

Excuses made to mask one's fear

Merely delay the scare.

So now I shall tell you the truth

As it is told to me,

And for those under Hogwarts' roof

There's one more chance to see...

The Hat's voice deepened and grew in intensity until it seemed to rattle the walls around them:

You refused to heed my warning;

A mere handful did unite.

Though decrees made it much harder,

It was yours to see the light.

I remember the Four Founders

And their madness in the end;

Even now their old school flounders,

Against whom shall we defend?

Dark Lords risen, Dark Lords fallen,

Hogwarts stood the test of time.

Dark decisions, leaders stalling,

Governors commit high crime;

Ministry lies now in shambles,  
Corrupt power it does wield.  
Where lies Hogwarts once was brambles;  
Soon an empty, poppied field.  
Alliances could save the day  
As darkness swallows the Isle;  
Will Hogwarts' students show the way,  
Or will they sow denial?  
Slytherin, turn - I beseech thee,  
Or spurn me if you dare;  
As for the other houses three...  
BEWARE.

There were shrieks at the last, and then the assembled hall descended into a cacophony of whispers and mutters. A few moments later, the Hat went slack and fell to the stone floor. Detheridge vaulted the table to join Dumbledore beside the Hat. As Flitwick, Croaker and Marchbanks rushed around the table – for his part, Harry pressed back against the wall – the Hall erupted into bedlam.

The food for the feast unexpectedly appeared; shortly thereafter, plates of food lifted into the air and flew from one table to the next. A group of young Ravenclaws began tossing goblets, plates, food – anything loose – at the Slytherin table, and the Slytherins immediately retaliated. Harry saw the glint of a raised wand amidst the melee, and quickly moved out from behind the table and in front of the teachers crouched around the Hat.

Snape climbed up onto the staff table, raised his wand, cast a brilliant red flare above the assembled students, and boomed, "SILENCE!" The Slytherins stopped instantly; the rest of the hall followed suit within seconds. The Potions Master lowered his wand. "Any member of Ravenclaw House who sends so much as a crumb in the direction of the Slytherin table will be docked twenty points. Any member of my House who does the same will have to reckon with me."

Flitwick's voice squeaked across the Hall. "I believe I've identified our problem." The other teachers backed away as Flitwick placed the Hat atop the conjured stool, and then thrust his wand into the open rip and called out an unfamiliar spell. The rip opened wide, wider than when the Hat had sung. Peeves the Poltergeist tumbled out, squeezed Flitwick's nose, and cackled, "GOT YOUR CONK!"

"Peeves!" McGonagall shouted. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Say 'please'!" Peeves mocked.

McGonagall's countenance went from red to purple. "Peeves, you... you bloody menace!" she howled; just as quickly, she hid her face with her hands.

"Even ickle firsties say 'please'," Peeves pouted.

Dumbledore turned toward the Slytherin table. "Good Baron, sir, would you be so kind as to join us for a moment?" The Bloody Baron began to glide silently and menacingly toward the centre of the Hall.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished. A zooming sound rushed along the near side of the Hufflepuff table, sending goblets and plates flying one after the next and forcing many students beneath the table. The Baron flew swiftly between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables and passed through the rear wall of the Hall.

Dumbledore said something to McGonagall, who nodded and quickly made her way to the anteroom. He made the conjured stool vanish with a wave of his hand, and then cleared the five tables with a single flick of his wand. "I know that we can count on the splendid house-elves to prepare some sort of alternate meal for us. While it may be

simpler than our usual feast – perhaps a nice stew with assorted breads and cheeses – it is truly the company that matters this evening, and not the food that we shall eat.” He turned to the staff table, and added, “Thank you for restoring order, Professor Snape.”

Harry debated returning to the table, but instead followed Detheridge, Flitwick and Croaker to the anteroom, where they set the Sorting Hat down atop the nearest table and immediately began poking and prodding and subjecting it to all manner of magical inspection. McGonagall sat in the corner, facing in toward the wall. Violet, the Fat Lady’s friend, looked on from her frame with concern. Harry considered approaching, and then thought better of it.

“The enchantments are so complex... gentlemen, I’m afraid that we must stop for fear of doing irreparable damage,” Flitwick announced.

“Very tightly layered,” Croaker murmured.

“They would have to be,” Detheridge agreed. “I didn’t think it was possible to maintain an enchantment for a thousand years.”

“Yes, indeed!” Flitwick chirped. “They must be periodically restored in some fashion that... I wonder... the hat does typically interact with the Headmaster at the start of each sorting day... perhaps it draws upon the Headmaster’s magical energy?”

Detheridge slapped his wand down against the table in frustration. “None of this explains how that mad ghost could have influenced this thing!”

“Peeves isn’t a ghost, per se,” Flitwick noted. “Perhaps poltergeists affect magical flow differently than ghosts?”

“What if Peeves didn’t make the hat do anything?” Harry blurted out.

Flitwick lowered the hat, and Detheridge stared at Harry oddly. “That’s absurd, Mr. Potter,” Croaker snapped. “I realise I haven’t been hanging about Hogwarts for many a year, but if the Sorting Hat is anything, it is reliable.”



“Any number of things may have happened,” Flitwick said. “I suppose that we shall never know.” Harry let out a long sigh without intending it, which drew the Charms professor’s attention. “Speak your mind, Mr. Potter.”

“Why don’t you just ask it?” Harry groaned.

“Well, Mr. Potter... the hat sorts, the hat sings... it tells jokes on occasion... I honestly don’t know what it does with the Headmaster... I can’t say that it actually converses.” Flitwick shrugged. “Why not?” He held up the hat level to his eyes. “Excuse me? Er... Mr. Hat? We have a few questions, if you don’t mind?”

“I have sung,” the hat said in a particularly morose way. At that, a muffled cacophony of singing echoed through the door to the Great Hall.

“What in the Nine Hells...?” Detheridge exclaimed.

Flitwick explained. “The Headmaster is leading the students in the singing of the school song. It’s another of our little traditions.”

Detheridge’s eyes narrowed. “Song? It sounds like a hundred songs, all jumbled up!”

Flitwick laughed merrily. “Yes, indeed – that is the tradition, Marcus!”

Detheridge shook his head. “An odd school you have here, Flitwick.”

McGonagall spoke from the corner. “I imagine Albus wishes to introduce the new members of the staff. I’ll look after the Hat.”

“I’ll stay,” Harry said quickly.

Flitwick nudged Harry toward the door. “Don’t you think that your training relationship with Albus might take up a rather large part of his announcements?”

Harry moved to one side. “Maybe the students should be paying attention to him, then, rather than staring at me.”

"If he doesn't want to go, then don't force him, Filius," McGonagall called out. "Albus will call for Harry if his presence is required." Flitwick let out a small harrumph, and bustled through the door.

Croaker looked Harry up and down. "Rather impudent for an apprentice," he said sourly before leaving the anteroom.

"I didn't think asking the hat to explain itself was a bad idea; I still don't think so," Detheridge whispered in Harry's ear before he followed Croaker out into the raucous din.

McGonagall sat facing the hearth. Harry didn't understand why she was so devastated, but it was obvious in the way she had fled the Great Hall; in any case, her pain practically filled the air. He was surprised that the other professors hadn't acknowledged it – I suppose they were all focused on the Hat, he guessed.

"Professor..." he began tentatively.

"Not now, Potter," she said firmly without the slightest turn toward him.

He wasn't about to press his luck. The Hat sat there on a small table, looking long overdue for a return visit to the haberdasher. He sidled up to it, stared at it for a while, then pulled up a chair, sat forward upon it, and stared some more.

"What were you playing at, Hat?" he murmured.

The Hat abruptly straightened as though it were standing at attention, and the rip opened slightly. It crooned in a low voice, not far above a whisper:

To the school, I gave a morsel

Of that which to me is known.

I could have been more blunt, 'tis true;

Oh, how Ravenclaw would moan...

McGonagall exploded out of her chair in the same instant as the Hat completed its verse. "Oh, for pity's sake! This is not a bordello!"

The Hat raised its voice and sniffed:

Glorify neither death nor life;

Give to both their rightful due.

Godric would laugh and shake his head -

His house is led by a shrew!

McGonagall turned a shade of puce that Harry had never seen on any human save his uncle. "A shrew, am I? Keep this up, and you'll find me a particularly mad hatter!"

"It wasn't Peeves, then... well, at least the mad part wasn't Peeves," Harry managed to say.

"No, it wasn't! It was all from this mean-spirited, vulgar..." McGonagall stopped abruptly, and her angry blush began to fade. "Good heavens... it wasn't Peeves."

The Hat sang confidently:

A poltergeist is hard to hide

And even harder to sort.

I allowed Peeves to stay inside

And stage his Great Hall retort.

"He's always wanted to come to one of the feasts, hasn't he?" Harry blurted out. He picked up the Hat and held it at eye level. "That's what you were doing, then? You were granting Peeves a wish?"

The Hat folded oddly, as though it was pursing its lip. It remained silent for a few long moments, before it sang out:

Put me on and we shall both see

If your sorting still rings true.

Are you still a bold Gryffindor?

Perhaps it's Slytherin for you?

McGonagall stilled Harry's arm as he raised the Hat high. "Do not place it upon your head, Mr. Potter. Not even Merlin could say what would happen, given its state."

The Hat did not sing; it spoke its response reverently: "I would light myself afire before I would do harm to anyone who serves the Light."

"Has the Hat ever asked someone to put it on, outside of the sorting?" Harry wondered aloud. He heard McGonagall's muffled voice demand that he wait for Dumbledore, as the Hat lowered over his ears.

The voice of the Hat wasn't heard so much as it was felt.

Well, well, I must say that I never expected to have you wear me again.

"I hadn't planned on it, either," Harry said aloud.

You are most difficult to read, and that was not the case five years ago... quite surprising, really. Are you an Occlumens, Mister Potter?

"Er... sort of," Harry tried to explain. "I didn't complete any sort of real training."

You indeed have something of Slytherin within you, as I saw when you were Sorted. Are you untrained in the ways of Occlumency, or were you improperly trained?

“Improperly trained,” Harry answered quickly. “Are you enchanted to do Legilimency? Is that how the Sorting works?”

I weigh the qualities that I see within the first-years against a body of knowledge imparted by the Founders. The magic predates Legilimency as you understand it.

“Then how do you even know about it – Legilimency, I mean? How do you learn anything new, just sitting there?” Harry asked.

My, aren’t we filled with questions this evening? I learn in the same way as you do, Mister Potter – I listen and I observe. Ask your fill of questions. I will answer if it befits my purposes.

Harry started with the question that he figured Dumbledore would most want answered. “Did you mean it? Did you mean the words in the song?”

I mean everything that I say or sing.

Harry tried to get the Hat to be clearer. “So the warning... it was rather to the point, wasn’t it? You intended that?”

I mean everything that I say or sing.

“And the rest of it... the, er, part that left everyone worked up? You meant all of it? It wasn’t Peeves having you on?” Harry pressed.

Shall I answer a third time, Mister Potter?

“No, no...” Harry fell silent, uncertain of what to ask.

Shall I assist you in opening your mind to me?

Harry sat bolt upright. “I’m sorry?”

You are most difficult to read, Mister Potter. I cannot weigh the contents of your thoughts against the knowledge of the Founders, and so I must judge based solely upon your words. I imagine it is akin

to partaking in food without possessing a sense of taste. I would much prefer it if I could simply ascertain your thoughts.

“Wait! If you could teach me that, then... you could have taught me the rest of it!” Harry broke into laughter. “And I put up with Snape for a whole year... yes! Assist me, please!” McGonagall barked something at him, but he couldn’t make out the words; he supposed that it related to removing the Hat, so he wasn’t inclined to listen in the first place.

Very well. I shall have to determine the extent of your defences against mental invasion. Past Headmasters told me that this produces a small amount of pain.

Before Harry could say anything in return, his jaw clenched of its own accord and he lurched forward onto his knees. There was the feeling of a hand upon his shoulder and then firm but unsuccessful tugging on the Hat. When he recovered enough to think, he decided that while it wasn’t like the Cruciatus Curse, it was more than a small amount of pain.

What purpose do the walls of Hogwarts serve?

Harry was still reeling. “The walls... wha...?”

What purpose do the walls of Hogwarts serve?

“Hold up the building?” he mumbled.

True, but how do a castle’s walls differ from the walls of a rude hut?

“Umm... they keep people out?” Harry offered.

Correct again. Do the walls keep people out by attacking them?

“The walls...?” He rubbed at his temples. “Walls don’t attack; they, er, just sit there and hold up the whole works... they just keep people out.”

The walls of your mind attack; they do not defend. In so doing, they prevent you from mounting a true defence. You are using projective means – the art you call Legilimency – to prevent the same means from being used against you. To be improperly trained implies that you were trained at all; I see no evidence of training, only the ability to powerfully lash out. Before you can build walls that defend, you must remove the walls that attack. The Headmaster possesses the knowledge that you require.

“The Headmaster didn’t want to –” Harry sighed and shook his head. “Never mind... thank you.”

You are somewhat more open now; I see flashes of your thoughts. I still stand by my original judgment, Mister Potter; had you come to Hogwarts in the time of the Founders, you would have been sorted to Slytherin. As for the young ladies at play in your mind...

Harry cut the Hat off. “Pardon me! Have you always been like this?”

Gryffindor had no patience for men unwilling to embrace their passions, nor for those unwilling to look at the past – warts and all. The knowledge and instructions of Gryffindor have risen to the fore in these dark hours. I listen and I observe. The signs are present; the hours will grow darker still before the dawning of new light. You are in the thick of it, of course, but you hardly need a Hat to tell you that. There is something in you that prevents you from following your passions and seeking your dreams, something that prevents you from embracing the path of Gryffindor... a prophecy...

“Stop! Get out of those thoughts!” Harry demanded.

Then stop I shall, but remember this – prophecies are best taken as uncertain guideposts, Ravenclaw said. Slytherin was more blunt. He thought that a prophecy scroll was best left on the side of an abandoned trail. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff would offer you more direct advice, Mister Potter, and I believe that their advice weighs best against your thoughts.

“What advice is that?” Harry asked.

Live.

Harry kept quiet, waiting for the Hat to finish its thought. After the best part of a minute, he snapped, "What... that's it? 'Live'?"

Yes.

"Not a very practical bit of advice, that," Harry snorted.

It is eminently practical. It is not in your nature to surrender your life to someone else's words, yet you have done so. Stop it, Gryffindor would tell you. Live.

Harry thought of Ron. "A friend of mine, he's been doing that... he's trying to fit it all in, you know, while he still can..."

Where is the hope in that? That is not living, Mister Potter.

"Fine, then – 'live' it is," Harry harrumphed.

A last piece of advice, then – and I hope it is sufficiently practical to meet with your approval. Three of the four Founders understood what I am about to tell you, and look at what they have wrought. Here is what they knew:

Beneath all the trappings, magic is about meaning what you say and not about saying what you mean.

I take my leave of you, Harry Potter. We shall not speak again.

There was an audible pop! as the Hat came loose from Harry's head; the rip had disappeared, and the Hat had gone completely slack. McGonagall stood before him, while Dumbledore sat impassively in the chair she had occupied before.

McGonagall had the look of someone who had shouted until she was spent. "Of all the ill-advised, impudent, dangerous things you could have chosen to mark your return to this castle..."



"Your point is taken, Minerva," Dumbledore said gently. "Based on your side of things, Harry, I surmise you had a fascinating conversation. An explanation, if you please?"

"The Hat asked me to put it on, so I did," Harry said defensively. "Detheridge didn't seem to think it was a bad idea."

"Professor Detheridge said that he thought it was a good idea on your part to ask the Hat about its intentions; he said nothing about placing it upon your head," McGonagall snapped. When Harry shot her a cross look, she added briskly, "Well, it was a rather pathetic attempt at a whisper on his part."

Dumbledore slowly rose from his chair and approached Harry. "How are you feeling? An extended exchange with the Hat can be disorienting, in my experience."

"I'm fine," Harry insisted.

"Was the Hat testing the limits of your Occlumency, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry was caught off guard. "Er... sort of, I guess. It couldn't read my thoughts, but it was going to teach me something. It couldn't teach me, though; it said I'd have to see you about what I need."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "And what is it that you need, in the Hat's estimation?"

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists. "I told the Hat I hadn't been completely trained. The Hat said I haven't had training of any sort; it said my defences are all wrong. I wasted a year with Snape – a whole year!"

"I have already acknowledged that prevailing upon Professor Snape to provide your instruction was an error on my part," Dumbledore said. "It was a grievous error, Harry. What else would you have me say?"

"That you've found another Potions Master to teach me, for a start?" Harry growled.

Dumbledore summoned a small, crooked smile. "As I told you, I have been unable to secure another Potions Master; therefore an alchemist will have to do. I shall teach you myself. In addition, it appears that the matter of Occlumency must be addressed sooner rather than later. May I be permitted to examine your defences?"

Harry hesitated, then gave an uncertain nod. He stood and steeled himself. Dumbledore frowned. "Harry, I encourage you to relax; we will not be conducting a duel. Did you acquire this posture from Severus?" Harry nodded again and Dumbledore's frown deepened.

Harry's sense of uncertainty grew. He turned to McGonagall. "Professor... if I do anything that seems odd – you know, out of sorts – I want you to stun me."

"You have not felt Voldemort's presence in your mind since the events at the Department of Mysteries – is that correct?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded. "I don't want to take a chance. I mean, you left me to Snape because you were worried that Voldemort might be able to get to you through me, right?"

"I am less concerned now, Harry, though it is wise to take precautions," Dumbledore admitted. "Minerva, please do as he asked of you." McGonagall hesitantly raised her wand.

"Let's do this, then," Harry said. He had to force himself to meet Dumbledore's eyes – those eyes reminded him of so many things that didn't need reminding.

"Legilimens," Dumbledore said softly.

It was nothing like Snape's hammer blows, nor like the Hat's methodical assault. It was as though the Headmaster had become a cloud around which Harry couldn't wrap his arms. Every time he felt Dumbledore's presence, there was movement of a sort; after a few moments, it became clear that Dumbledore was entering from more than one place at a time. Harry felt the memory of his conversation

with the Sorting Hat pull free, and he reacted from someplace angry. He wielded his darkest memories like a sword tinged with blood. Harry could scarcely make out the shock on Dumbledore's face through the haze of images that hung between them.

He heard Dumbledore say in a shaky voice, "Finite incan... tatum... fini... good heavens – oh, Harry, was it really so... no... leave him, Minerva..." The anger dissipated, pushed aside by a flood of other memories that he couldn't seem to stop – Quidditch matches and Common Room chess matches and secret passages and quiet library evenings and breaking prophecy orbs and slashing purple curses and Death Eaters dying and Hermione crying and the Bonnie flying and Heather smiling and a mind-blowing kiss and crushing rejection by Remus and meeting the Teller brothers and a mobile phone and stop... stop... STOP!

"Expelliarmus!" Harry gasped. Dumbledore reeled backward, and Harry rushed forward to help; somehow he managed to put himself behind the Headmaster in time to break his fall. Harry ended up on his back, with Dumbledore seated on his chest.

"Thank you... I trust... that you are... undamaged?" Dumbledore panted. Harry tried to answer, but he was too winded to manage it.

McGonagall was positively wide-eyed. "Potter... what did you just do? You were here and then you were there, but... but that's not possible, not in this place –"

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Minerva, perhaps you could help me to my feet before beginning an interrogation?" With a sudden 'Oh!', she dashed over and extended a hand. Harry knew that McGonagall wasn't in the fittest condition to be helping anyone up, and he unceremoniously pushed from beneath and behind until the Headmaster regained his feet. Dumbledore in turn helped Harry rise.

"Now... about what you just did, Mr. Potter –" McGonagall began.

"Harry's movement across the room bears a resemblance to descriptions of the event at Miss Granger's home," Dumbledore interrupted. "We shall explore the phenomenon in due course;

however, Harry and I have some pressing matters to which we must attend... immediately."

McGonagall worried her lip for a moment, looked to Harry, and then said, "I still must speak to you about Miss Granger, Albus. A few minutes of your time would be appreciated, after you have concluded your business with Mr. Potter."

"I understand your concerns, Minerva," Dumbledore said, "and while I do not disregard them, I shall not react based upon them. Miss Granger will remain among us, and we shall adjust as necessary."

"Miss Granger is presently unable to comport herself as a student," McGonagall said tersely.

"Then Miss Granger shall comport herself as something other than a student, if that is required," Dumbledore responded. "We have accepted responsibility for her, and we will fulfil that obligation. Lucia shall be here in three days; I am hopeful that her presence will provide a balancing influence. Are there other matters that we must discuss? I would like to retire for the evening after Harry and I have finished."

McGonagall's eyes flashed. "No, Headmaster," she said sharply, then turned heel and went forth into the Great Hall.

"Walk with me," Dumbledore said. The request had the formal air of a master summoning his apprentice.

Harry responded in kind: "Yes, Headmaster."

Walking through the castle with Dumbledore was a peculiar experience. There were still a few older students about, though curfew was fast approaching. The Headmaster gave off a sense of being completely in control; Harry hadn't really picked up on that before, and he was more than a little envious. Only two seventh-year Hufflepuffs who Harry didn't know managed to work up the courage to greet the Headmaster. Maybe they're staying away because of me? Harry wondered. When they reached the entrance to

Dumbledore's chambers, the Headmaster gravely intoned, "Extendable Ears"; Harry had to fight off the urge to snigger.

As soon as the door closed – before they reached the office – Dumbledore posed a question. "Did you remain in the anteroom so that you could converse with the Hat, or did you remain there because you wished to avoid the Great Hall?"

Harry was caught off-guard. "Wha... why does it matter?" he stammered.

"One should never answer a question by posing another," Dumbledore said.

"Are... are you serious? You do it all the time," Harry observed.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "Do I? Good heavens... I just did it, didn't I?" He broke into an easy laugh. "Gracious, a second time; I'll do my level best to avoid a third! Harry, you see... there are a few compensations that come with age. One of those is that it's more acceptable to be old and inappropriate than it is to be young and inappropriate. To answer a question with another question is generally considered rude. We shall both endeavour to avoid the practice, although I do reserve the right to repeated questioning as a method of instruction."

"Fine, then... the answer was both, I suppose," Harry offered. "I wasn't comfortable at the head table."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, stroking his beard, "I anticipated a certain amount of discomfort, but your unease was palpable. Describe for me what you were feeling, please?"

"Everyone was staring at me, and... and the walls were getting close. They were... look, I know this sounds foolish, but they were judging me. I could feel it..." Harry trailed off with a shudder.

"That is very interesting, and rather unlike you," Dumbledore took a seat behind his massive desk, and conjured a comfortable chair for Harry. "When Severus attempted forcible Legilimency upon you, at

Grimmauld Place, you were obviously very angry. I am not saying that you lacked a reason for anger, but I must ask whether your anger felt different in any way. Was it deeper than you have known? Sharper, perhaps?”

“I don’t know... it seems like such a long time ago,” Harry said.

Dumbledore resumed stroking his beard. “Marcus mentioned that you seemed particularly attentive toward Minerva’s well being, after the episode with Peeves. He also mentioned that you seemed particularly wicked toward Mr. Malfoy, but we shall take that up another time perhaps?”

Harry hesitated, before he admitted, “I suppose I tried to comfort Professor McGonagall earlier, when we arrived at the castle.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Is that so? Does this relate to her episode with Miss Granger?”

“She was just so upset by it,” Harry explained. “I was probably out of bounds, but –”

“Demonstrating simple human kindness is never out of bounds, Harry,” Dumbledore said firmly. “The reason that I have pursued this line of enquiry is so that I can confirm my suspicions about what Severus has wrought. My test of your boundaries offered confirmation enough, I suppose. The task before us is to determine what is to be done about it.”

Harry’s voice rose. “I’m sorry... ‘done to me’? He wasn’t just a horrible teacher – he did something to me?”

Dumbledore sighed. “If I am correct, Severus did precisely what I would not do. I have come to believe he intentionally set you on a course, Harry; he attempted to prepare you as a weapon.”

“WHAT? That... he... he had no right!” Harry growled. Two of the whirring silver objects on Dumbledore’s side table abruptly broke into pieces. Dumbledore said nothing – his face betrayed nothing – but Harry slumped into his chair, ashamed by the outburst.

He closed his eyes and collected his thoughts, as he knew he should. Part of him felt even more violated by Snape than before. Snape hadn't assaulted his mind simply because he was a miserable human being; he'd done it for a purpose, one that he hadn't shared with Dumbledore. Dumbledore had hired Quirrell and Lockhart, had been fooled by Crouch Jr., had been outmanoeuvred by Fudge and Umbridge... what if Snape was a legitimate Death Eater? The rest of him felt rather differently; that part of Harry thought he understood why Snape might have been thinking, if Dumbledore's belief was correct. That part of Harry thought –

"He should have just told me," Harry said aloud.

"Explain yourself," Dumbledore demanded.

Harry tried to look away from the Headmaster, but that left him staring at a row of intently focused portraits. He closed his eyes. "Snape was right, if that's what he was doing. He could have told me; it would have saved a lot of trouble."

"Severus was surely mistaken in his actions and in the beliefs behind them," Dumbledore said, "but I would like to know why you believe he was correct."

Harry opened his eyes to the Headmaster's intense gaze. He knew he was right, and he set his jaw. "I'm sixteen, and I'm still alive out of sheer dumb luck. Voldemort is... I don't know, he must be, what... sixty? Older than that?"

"Older, yes. Tom was two classes behind Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore said.

"Fine, then – seventy. I doubt I could best McGonagall in a straight-ahead duel." Harry let out a hollow laugh. "Sprout could probably beat me. What can I possibly learn in two years that will let me defeat Voldemort?"

"I do not expect that you will vanquish Voldemort in a duel of wands," Dumbledore returned. "I still wish to know why you believe Severus was in the right."

"If Snape was going to make a weapon, I think he'd make a bomb," Harry said idly. "He'd make something that didn't need skill, because he wouldn't trust anyone else's skills."

Dumbledore cast his eyes downward. "That is a fair assessment of Severus, but... Harry, we have discussed this point on more than one occasion –"

"We haven't discussed anything!" Harry snapped. "You keep saying I shouldn't sacrifice myself to kill Voldemort. How else am I supposed to manage it, then? You were there at the Ministry, you saw..." His throat tightened at the memories – visions of Hermione falling and the brains tearing at Ron and Voldemort burning him from the inside out. "You saw what happened to me; you saw what Voldemort did. I was defenceless!"

"Based on eyewitness reports, you injured Voldemort rather severely," Dumbledore countered. "It is a reasonable premise that he performed the phasma transtuli ritual because of damage to his reconstituted body. Your success came despite what Severus did, and not because of it."

"It didn't feel like success," Harry said. "I wanted to die, I truly did." Something tickled at the back of his mind. "Phasma transtuli... that's what I saw him doing, the last time he was in my head. It's a healing spell, then?"

"It's very far from that," Dumbledore frowned. He slowly rose, and recovered a tome from a nearby shelf; it was so old that the edges of the pages were crumbling. He opened it to a place marked by a strip of green ribbon, ran the tip of his finger along a column of dense text, and then jabbed at a particular spot. "Phasma transtuli... this ritual has nothing whatsoever to do with healing, Harry. It appears to be a sort of transference ritual, a more complete one than he employed in your first year. Voldemort transferred his vital essence into another body; in doing so, he would completely suppress the mind within that



body, but still have a full connection to its knowledge and experiences. It is as dark a ritual as one could imagine; the only reason that it is not Unforgivable is that it requires some level of consent on the part of the person who is to be subsumed. I have been able to find little more than that, Harry; it is an arcane magic that has not performed for many hundreds of years.”

Harry nearly leapt from his chair. “That’s why he sounds different!”

“Yes... you did mention that,” Dumbledore acknowledged.

“His hands were different as well!” Harry went on excitedly. “I noticed it the first time, but in the pensieve it was even clearer. They were, I don’t know... soft hands, very pink. They hadn’t seen a lot of hard work, for certain.”

“That could prove useful; thank you, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “You have reviewed those events in a pensieve? Would you be willing to review them again, for the benefit of others?”

“Shacklebolt saw it,” Harry admitted. “He said... well, he said a lot of things, actually. I’ll do it for you, if you like. I don’t know if I want anyone else to see it...”

“Reticence on your part is quite reasonable. We will find an appropriate time later this week. Now, I believe I was telling you that your success was in spite of what Severus did?” Dumbledore sat back slightly, clearly waiting for Harry to question the observation.

“I’m trying to guess what you want me to ask,” Harry said honestly.

Dumbledore laughed heartily. “I am beginning to see that you will be the most straightforward of my apprentices! I have been fortunate to spend rather a lot of time with you and in your presence over the last few weeks, Harry, and I have observed a pattern in your behaviour.” When Harry fidgeted in his chair, he added, “Do not be alarmed by that; I doubt that anyone but myself would possess all the knowledge required to discern the pattern. I would like to test the assumptions behind this pattern, however. I want you to look me in the eye, and answer my questions as I ask them. Is that acceptable?”

"You're not going to use Legilimency again, are you?" Harry asked.

"No... that experience should not be repeated in a single evening," Dumbledore answered.

Harry nodded in assent, and met the Headmaster's eyes. Dumbledore took a deep breath, and asked, "How do you feel about the Prophecy?"

Harry was caught off guard for a moment by the question, but then felt anger rise. "How do you think I feel? I don't have a life, and Voldemort wants to kill me!"

"How do you feel about all the people that Voldemort has killed?" Dumbledore asked him.

"Voldemort is a monster," Harry snapped. "How can he... I mean, it's... it's horrible! How can he look people in the eye and just snuff out their lives?" He shuddered at the futility and the sadness of it. "I don't know how he does it. I think about... you know, about what I did... and I feel like I should bathe, like I'll never be able to wash it off."

"Do you feel guilty about what you did at the Grangers' home?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes... I mean, I don't know," Harry answered. "Why should I? They deserved what happened... wait... I mean..." He felt suddenly nauseous and lowered his head into his hands. "I don't know what I think anymore." He heard the rustling of robes, and Dumbledore's hand came to rest upon his shoulder.

"I imagine that it's very difficult for you to know where your own thoughts and feelings stop, and where those around you begin," Dumbledore said. "It has likely been much more difficult since returning to Hogwarts."

Harry buckled under a wave of emotion. He didn't raise his head; he didn't want to show the Headmaster how weak he was, underneath it

all. His voice came out as a ragged shout. "What's wrong with me? What did Snape do to me?"

"Severus opened you up to the world, after a fashion," Dumbledore explained. "He most certainly did not teach you Occlumency as it is normally understood. When I entered your mind earlier, you made no attempt – conscious or unconscious – at concealing your thoughts. When the intrusion reached a certain threshold, you simply lashed out. You tried to forcibly eject me from your mind, and you did it by practicing Legilimency."

"That was all we ever practiced," Harry said coldly. "He would attack me, and attack me, over and over, until I threw him off."

Dumbledore let a flash of something escape his eyes. For an instant, Harry felt a rush of towering rage, and then it quickly faded. "Occlumency is an art of evasion, not of attack. Severus Snape is a master of that art; if he were not, he would not be alive today. In fact, he took to the discipline more rapidly than any wizard I have ever known. The most favourable explanation possible is that he was utterly incompetent in his efforts to instruct you. I would require a good deal of convincing in order to accept that explanation. Surely he saw that you were displaying raw ability as a Legilimens; he should have known to stop at once and to consult me. One must never train as a Legilimens prior to achieving mastery of Occlumency. Good heavens, I have only just completed a remediation for just that situation!"

Harry felt the rage again, and struggled to bite out a question. "Why Occlumency first?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened, and then quickly closed as he launched into a series of slow breaths. "I am terribly sorry, Harry. I did not intend to demonstrate the answer to your question. Tell me, do you think it would be wise to set ablaze a tree in the midst of a forest if you did not first possess the means of extinguishing the fire?"

"Of course not," Harry snapped impatiently.

“An Occlumens learns to organize his mind in such a way that certain knowledge or feelings can be completely isolated from intrusion. The knowledge is still present, but the intruder cannot locate it. Think of the concealment as a Disillusionment; the selected knowledge is made to appear like its surroundings, in a way,” Dumbledore explained. “Once these skills are mastered, then it is safe for a capable wizard to learn to project himself outside of those boundaries and into the boundaries of others. Without those skills, a Legilimens would have no means of protecting himself from the thoughts and feelings around him. Do you understand?”

Harry began tentatively, “In the Great Hall... I wasn’t being judged; the walls weren’t closing in on me. That was... that was Professor Tonks, wasn’t it?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Andromeda is agoraphobic to a modest degree. As such, she was surely projecting her fears.”

“You were planting feelings just now, weren’t you?” Harry went on. “You were making me feel things.”

“I was strongly projecting selected feelings, yes,” Dumbledore told him. “I never attempted to enter your mind, however; your mind is continuously reaching out and receiving the thoughts and feelings around you.”

Harry began to take in the implications of what he was hearing, and his stomach lurched. “Would I take in just bad feelings – fear, anger and that sort... or would I notice good feelings as well?”

“At present, I imagine that it’s all there for the taking,” Dumbledore acknowledged. “You have probably been experiencing this to some degree since the springtime. I am truly sorry for that.”

“Then over the summer... oh, no...” Harry slumped heavily. That’s why I felt the way I did with Hermione, he thought. I never felt that way about her before; I was picking up... oh, Merlin... was I was picking up her feelings? What am I supposed to do with that? And what about Heather? No wonder that kiss went wild! Neither one of us knew how to...

He immediately popped up. "Heather!" he blurted out. "She has it all backward, as well!"

"Yes, that is the remediation to which I was referring," Dumbledore said. "It was when conferring with Severus about Miss Magruder's circumstances that I began to seriously question some of his comments about your training."

"Is she going to be all right, then?" Harry demanded to know.

"I focussed upon teaching her how to avoid and how to terminate accidental Legilimency," Dumbledore responded. "In the time available, addressing Occlumency was out of the question. I am not entirely certain whether she possesses the capability to learn both disciplines; her situation is truly singular."

Harry pressed. "You didn't answer my question, sir."

"That is because I am not certain how to answer it," Dumbledore admitted. "She is less at risk than immediately following your shared experience, and likely more susceptible than she was before the experience occurred. Most of her time is spent amongst Muggles, which is also to her benefit. Wizards and magical beings tend to project their emotions and thoughts more forcefully. Occlumency must be addressed beginning tomorrow, or you will come to find Hogwarts an intolerable environment."

"Is there anything else, Headmaster?" Harry asked politely. "I promised Hermione that I'd stop by the Common Room and see her, and it's getting late."

"Many points of discussion remain," Dumbledore said. "For example, we have yet to decide what is to be done about Severus —"

"I'm sorry... did you say 'we'?" Harry snorted.

"Yes, Harry, we have decisions to make," Dumbledore returned earnestly. "It appears that he has committed a serious transgression. You have been wronged, and you are now considered an adult; as

such, the determination of how to proceed falls to you. Because Severus is in my employ as a professor... and for other reasons, of course... it is reasonable that I assert an interest in the outcome of the matter.”

Harry stared at the Headmaster in shock for several long moments. His voice cracked when he at last spoke. “I need... I need to think on it overnight.”

Dumbledore gave a satisfied nod. “A wise first step, Harry. I also remain very interested in what the Hat had to say about the song that it sang, for one. If you would offer me a summary, I believe that other issues may be held for tomorrow.”

“Well, the Hat said that it meant everything it said or sang,” Harry reported. “It also said that Peeves was hard to sort, and that it decided to grant Peeves his greatest wish.”

Dumbledore’s eyes lit. “Oh! Peeves has asked to attend the Welcoming Feast for at least as many years as I have been a member of the staff. So that Hat implied that Peeves was not responsible for the rather off-colour lyrics?”

Harry shook his head and said, “It told me three times that it meant everything it said or sang.”

“The students and staff will be unlikely to take the Hat’s admonition seriously, given the rest,” Dumbledore observed. “Perhaps that is just as well, for the moment.”

“If that’s all...?” Harry said, rising from his seat.

Dumbledore held up one hand. “I am pleased that you are going to see Miss Granger, Harry. She has had a very difficult summer, and I have been either directly or indirectly responsible for most of her travails.”

Right in one, Harry thought. Still, he knew that Sirius had died because of many people’s mistakes – his own bad judgment, Dumbledore’s failures, Snape’s treachery, even Sirius’s own poor

choices. He knew that he could have saved Hermione so much pain if he had made the correct first choice. "Look," he admitted aloud, "I'm responsible for a fair bit myself. If I'd shut her out, if I hadn't told her about the prophecy –"

Dumbledore cut him off. "I encouraged you to share it. I did so without verifying for myself that you were practicing proper Occlumency; I did so without insisting that Miss Granger receive training in same; and I ultimately caused greater harm through my efforts to assure secrecy than would have been the case if I had taken no action at all. That being said, the assignation of blame is to no one's benefit at this point. Injuries have been committed, and the prophecy has most likely been given up. Instead I shall focus on my two greatest concerns of the day – the well-being of Miss Granger and of yourself."

Harry didn't want to be one of Dumbledore's greatest concerns – that was how bad things began, in his experience. "I'm fine," he said flatly. "Hermione isn't fine – that's obvious."

Dumbledore summoned an impassive expression that Harry found irritating. "There are a number of confidences that I refuse to break with regard to Miss Granger," he said. "It will be her choice as to whether she will divulge those confidences to you. I will share this much, however, as she was insistent that no secrets relating to this particular matter would be kept from you..." He paused for a few moments, and Harry waited anxiously; then he continued, "I have offered Miss Granger personal tuition and she has accepted. She will be assisting me with research. We will be studying the events of October 31, 1981, in an attempt to understand how Voldemort was disembodied and how it was that you survived the Killing Curse, Harry."

Harry felt a coldness run through him. "Wh... why would she want...? Why would you ask her to do that?"

"I have sought a unifying explanation before, on several occasions," Dumbledore answered. "Miss Granger is most intelligent, cogent in her analyses, and intimately familiar with you. I am hopeful that she will see that which I have failed to see. She has her own reasons for choosing this path, and it is her place to share or to not share those

reasons. I simply ask two things of you with regard to this enquiry, Harry. First, do not impede our efforts. We will share any findings with you – I promise you this and Miss Granger has insisted upon it. Second... Miss Granger requires your friendship, Harry, more than has ever been the case. Her need is desperate at the present time, though she may be unprepared to admit the true extent of that need. Therefore, I ask you to freely give it.”

Harry immediately said, “She’ll always have that; I’ll always be her friend.”

“You may find that it is no longer a simple matter to honour my request; she may even push you away. Even if that should prove to be the case, I still ask this of you. I have accepted responsibility for Miss Granger’s welfare, and I require your aid in order to meet that responsibility.” Dumbledore’s expression was quite serious, and Harry wasn’t sure what to make of it. The Headmaster inclined his head in a way that demanded a response.

“Of course,” Harry agreed.

“Splendid!” Dumbledore’s smile and twinkle returned. “We shall begin your training at nine o’clock tomorrow. I look forward to it. Off with you, then!”

The corridors were deserted now. Harry stopped and checked his watch in the flickering light of a wall sconce – it was nearly midnight. He made for the entrance hall and the central stairs at a brisk pace.

“Stop! Stop!” Filch called out from behind him.

Harry tensed; he had to remind himself that he was now free to go where he wished, when he wished. He summoned a posture that seemed right for an adult and a member of the staff. “What are you on about, Filch?” he returned.

Filch drew close and held up his lantern. “Oh... it’s you, Potter,” he said, his mouth set as though he’d bitten into spoiled fish. “The Headmaster stick you with rounds, did he?”



“No, I just left his office. I’m... on an errand for him,” Harry said.

Filch grunted in assent. “Don’t you be forgetting – you spot a student out of bounds, and it’s points and detention.”

The hair on the back of Harry’s neck rose. He looked down to see Mrs. Norris brushing lazily against his leg. He shook his leg slightly, but it didn’t deter the cat.

“Mrs. Norris!” Filch barked. The cat hissed, and resumed its brushing.

Harry shook his leg again, more firmly. “Erm... I really am on an errand... um... nice kitty...”

Filch reached down and picked up the cat, which fussed and squirmed in his arms. “What’s gotten into you?” he asked; his eyes narrowed, and he hissed at Harry, “Did you do something to her...?”

Harry held up his hands defensively. “No! Er... not a cat person, really... your guess is as good as mine... good night, Filch.” Filch growled and Harry walked away as fast as he could manage without breaking into a run.

There was no sign of anyone else about until he neared the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room. He prepared to round a corner when he saw the flickering of a lumos charm; the reflected light grew brighter, a clear sign that someone was approaching. He flattened himself against the corridor wall, then drew his wand and conjured a mirror to peer around the corner. Two figures approached, one of them familiar. He lit his own wand, and their approach slowed.

Harry rounded the corner. “Hello, Cho,” he said.

Cho let out a held breath. “Harry... thank Merlin it’s just you.”

Harry sniggered. “Yes, it’s just me,” he mocked.

Cho frowned. “I’ve been doing this for two years, and I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve come across someone else whose wand was alight.”

The tall boy next to Cho let out a deep, quiet laugh. "Scared of the shadows, Chang? As for me, I figured it was Professor Snape." He stuck out his hand. "Hello, Potter... Adrian Pucey."

Harry's eyes lit in recognition. "Hello, Pucey. Looks like you're getting tall for a Chaser."

Pucey looked bemused. "You recognise me... that's unexpected."

Harry grinned. "Of course – you're on the Slytherin team and you've always played fairly; that's memorable." Pucey scowled, but it felt perfunctory. Harry went on, "Head Boy, then? Congratulations to you... are you Quidditch captain as well?"

"Snape hasn't named a captain," Pucey said. "I'll see about that tomorrow."

Cho smiled faintly. "It's a shame, Harry – we're rid of that cow Umbridge and her decrees, and your playing days are finished anyway."

Harry wasn't sure whether she was pleased or displeased; he responded vaguely. "Nothing will be the same this year."

"See anyone mucking about, Potter? Anything lurking in the dark?" Pucey asked.

Harry shook his head. "Just Filch. I could have done without that... Mrs. Norris suddenly fancies me – can you imagine?" He shuddered, and Cho stifled a giggle.

Pucey yawned. "Almost done for the night... we should keep moving."

"Yes, one more spin past the Astronomy Tower, I think," Cho said. Pucey nodded without looking her way.

Harry felt an odd rush of something just then; he looked down just in time to see Cho brush against Pucey's hand with her own. He quickly begged off, once again saying that he was on an errand for the

Headmaster. Harry cancelled his lumos charm. The last flickers from Cho and Pucey's wands disappeared; and he was left with the dim light from the wall sconces, and with the realisation that he'd just felt what Cho was feeling. He resolved that he would put everything he had into mastering Occlumency.

The Fat Lady was snoring. She stirred as Harry approached, and released two bellowing snores before her eyes opened. "Goodness... are you aware of the hour, Mr. Potter?"

"The Headmaster sent me to speak to Hermione Granger," Harry told her.

She rolled her eyes, and said, "You hardly needed his blessing for that." The entrance to the Common Room was revealed, and Harry stepped inside.

Hermione was not alone. It was almost as though he was walking in on a D.A. meeting. Dean and Seamus were playing what looked to be some kind of Muggle card game. Ron was playing chess with Parvati, of all people. Harry squinted at the board; it appeared that she was at least holding her own. Hermione sat by the fire, her back to the door. She was huddled over one of the low tables along with Neville; surprisingly, Lavender Brown was beside them, along with Dennis Creevey. Ginny sat on the bottom of the steps to the girls' dormitories, quietly playing her violin for Katie Bell and Colin Creevey.

Ron looked up from the chessboard. "Harry's here," he said quietly, and stood to cross the Common Room. In short order, Harry found himself being warmly greeted by a crowd.

"What's all this?" Harry managed to ask amidst the crush.

"Gryffindors stick together," Dean said earnestly.

"You'll always be one of us, Harry," Katie added.

Ginny cut through the crowd. "Anyone who can truss up Malfoy like that has to be one of us," she said with a smirk.

When Harry's eyebrows began to rise, Ron snorted. "Come on, mate, who else could have done it but you? Besides, it was Hermione and it was Malfoy..."

"It was bloody brilliant, that's what it was," Seamus added quickly.

"It was an overreaction, Seamus, that's what it was," Harry said crossly. "Malfoy may be a rotten snake but he wasn't going to cast a slashing curse, not on the Express. If I'd stopped to think for a second, I wouldn't have done it." He consciously made himself relax, and added for everyone's benefit, "Besides, you had everything under control. If anything good came out of last year, it's that. When I came into the car and saw all of you together like that... look, that's how it's supposed to be."

"All right, then... nice to have you back, Harry. It's well past lights-out, everyone," Katie prompted. Most of the assembled Gryffindors began to shuffle toward their respective stairs.

Seamus stopped and faced Harry. "Me mam doesn't say who my friends are; that's for me to say... wanted you to know that."

"There's still a bed for you, Harry," Dean added. "'Course if we'd have tried to take over the space, Ron would've tossed us out the window."

Harry's throat tightened. "Thanks."

Ron said something to Lavender – who then disappeared up the stairs – and then took a seat on the sofa adjacent to Hermione. She had never left her seat, Harry realised.

Neville rose as Harry approached. As Harry reached him, Neville shook Harry's hand; it seemed oddly formal and was completely unexpected, and Harry awkwardly jammed his fingers in the process. "We would have taken care of her, you know," Neville whispered. "We'll be on the watch, all of us."

"I know," Harry whispered back. "Thank you." Neville nodded stiffly and made directly for the stairs. Harry let himself fall into the chair that Neville had vacated.

Hermione sat back heavily; her eyes never left the fire. "You can go now, Ron," she said flatly.

Ron sighed and began to stand. "Seems that I'm done here."

"I'd rather you stayed," Harry said.

Hermione turned to face Harry. Her eyes were dark and without expression. "I asked you if you might come and see me tonight. It isn't tonight anymore, it's tomorrow. I need to talk with you, Harry... you and me... us."

Harry almost reacted angrily, before he wondered how much of the feeling belonged to him. He bit back most of the anger. "Neither of us have enough friends to be pushing one away," he insisted. "Ron should stay."

Ron held up his hands. "For once, I'm not going to be the one starting a fight. If you need me, you know where I'll be."

Hermione waited until she heard Ron's footfalls on the steps before she called out, "Ron? I'm sorry! I just... this is going to be hard enough explaining to Harry; I can't imagine how you could possibly understand –" She stopped abruptly and crushed her face into her hands. "Oh, that came out so wrong! Bugger!"

Ron gave a wide-eyed pleading look that for an instant reminded Harry of Ron in the tree house, framed by silent fireworks and the red flush of guilt, but Harry knew this was different. It was painfully obvious that Ron wanted to do the right thing, but had no idea what that might be. Harry waved him back to the sofa.

Ron hesitated, but then shook his head. "Hermione... I might surprise you, you know. I'm not as thick as you think I am," he called back. "Good night, Harry."

Hermione lowered her hands from her face. She wrapped her arms around her knees, and returned her gaze to the fire. The wall sconces seemed unusually dim to Harry. The firelight shimmered against the

walls and the armchairs and the furnishings; the entire Common Room seemed haunted, he thought, including its other occupant.

He'd thought about what he might say to her, and what she might say to him, but it all began to evaporate as he sat there. As the evening had passed, he had reconsidered talking to her about her parents; if he would in fact be their Secret Keeper, then he reasoned that even Hermione shouldn't know – not immediately, in any case. That had led him to worry himself about what Voldemort might have done to her, and to wonder whether there could possibly be some sort of lingering connection between the two. He wasn't about to begin prying into those events; it would be up to Hermione to tell him, he had decided. He didn't want to share all the details of what Snape had done to him; if she learned that he had been mirroring other people's feelings – including hers – then it would surely leave both of them feeling guilty.

He could barely hear her when she at last spoke. "Do you think I hurt him? I don't want to hurt him, Harry."

"He took it better than I'd have guessed," Harry said. "He's changed."

Her voice remained low, but there was an edge to it. "We've changed... you, me ... but the rest of them up there... they're dreaming about trips to Hogsmeade and having nightmares about revisions. They don't know, Harry. They've read an article in the Daily Prophet and they think they know, they think they understand, but they don't. Thank God they don't."

"Ron understands," Harry returned.

"I suppose he does, to a point," Hermione allowed after a long pause. "He's been so nice, yesterday and today. I know I shouldn't shut him out, Harry, but I just... I'm just angry."

"You can be angry with me; it's all right," Harry offered.

She still wouldn't look at him, wouldn't look at anything but the flames, but she gave a small, wry smile. "I didn't need permission, but thank you all the same."

Since Dumbledore had explained to Harry about his constant Legilimency, the world seemed awash in feelings. The emotions he'd felt from Cho were nothing compared to the wash of feelings that were surely coming from Hermione. He sat in the quiet and breathed slowly, and let himself be buffeted by anger and pain and sadness and worry and fear. It was all jumbled together with something else warm and friendly and terribly familiar from earlier in the summer, and then he felt dizzy and awkward and the silence became uncomfortable. He started to speak, then quickly stopped himself and began to chuckle.

Hermione turned to face him, her brow furrowed, and he relaxed – her expression wasn't cold or dark or angry. "What?" she said; it wasn't snappish, nor was it a demand, but it was all so uniquely her.

"Gods... I was just about to ask how the rest of your summer went." He snorted. "Even I'm not that thick."

The corners of her mouth flickered. "I should hope not."

Harry couldn't stand another bout of silence. "I've been worried about you," he blurted out.

Hermione rubbed at the back of her left hand. "Sometimes I haven't known what to think, Harry... but I've been worried about you, as well."

Harry looked down at his right hand. "Erm... Dumbledore told me about the runes. He thought you might still have them. I don't know how it happened, I swear." He ran his thumb across the three faint markings there. "I'm not sorry about it, though."

"Do you understand what they mean? Did Dumbledore read them for you?" she asked.

"He told me about the new ones, yeah," he said, and then he reached out and took her hand – the act left him nervous for a moment. He could see a hint of the runes on both of their hands illuminated by the fire, and his brow beetled. "Yours aren't the same as mine... look."

“Dumbledore told me about that,” she said, as she leaned in and peered at both their hands. “I’m surprised he didn’t tell you,” she added with an edge to her voice.

“It seems like it’s been a year since he told me,” Harry said. “It was the same night that we all went to see Luna.”

Hermione tugged her hand free. “I see.”

Harry tried to guess why she had suddenly gone cold. “I... I probably should have said something that night, straight away. There were so many things happening, I just didn’t think of it.”

“It’s all right. I wouldn’t have taken it in,” Hermione sighed. “I scarcely remember that night. It’s just that I thought Dumbledore was holding out on you, that’s all.”

Harry didn’t remember Hermione having a tolerance for silence. Now she seemed content to stare mutely into the fire, and he was baffled, and the quiet was excruciating. “Why did you want me to come here tonight?” he asked at last.

She looked up sharply from the fire, suddenly defiant. “Do I have to spell it out for you? Honestly! Why did you want to come, then?”

Harry took in a sharp breath; she was so up-and-down that it was leaving him dizzy. “Dumbledore said you shouldn’t answer a question with a question – it’s rude,” he shot back.

“I’m not Dumbledore, am I?” Hermione snapped. Harry was certain that her jaw tightened; it was a familiar response to Dumbledore for him, but he’d never expected to see it from her.

“No you’re not, thank Merlin,” he said quickly, and he felt a lessening of the tension in the room.

Still, there was an uncomfortable intensity in her eyes when she spoke. “I wanted to say... I suppose I wanted to say the same things as I wrote in my letter. I wanted to say them to you in person.”



"Your letter..." Harry trailed off.

Hermione's eyes widened. "You... you did receive it, right? I sent it with... er... it was with another letter, and that one finally arrived so I assumed..." She worried her lip.

"It came," Harry admitted nervously. He reached into his robes, and withdrew the unopened envelope. "The post owl showed up this morning; it tried to claw me to pieces, actually."

Hermione abruptly sniggered. "The owl didn't appreciate being banished, eh?"

Harry tried to explain himself. "I'm sorry I didn't read it yet. First the owl tore up my arms, then Detheridge stopped by and we had to ride the train, and then there was everything with Malfoy, and then we arrived, and there was all the business with the Sorting Hat..."

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. "Ginny told me; she remembered most of the words. Did Peeves actually manage to possess the Hat?"

"No... or at least that's what the Hat told me," Harry said.

"The Hat spoke to you?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"It asked me to put it on, so I did," answered Harry.

Hermione had the look in her eye that came with a new book or a new problem, and Harry happily grinned at the sight of it. He let her wheedle the details from him; he would have shared them, of course, but he enjoyed the asking and the speculating and the wide-eyed excitement. He began to realise just how much he had missed her company. Still, he felt nervousness, an apprehension in the midst of her exploration. He was sure it wasn't coming from her; he felt that he could attribute it to himself with fair certainty.

"Harry... Harry?" He looked up into brown eyes unexpectedly close to his own. "Where did you go just now? Are you all right?" Hermione asked.

He swallowed roughly, took a deep breath, and decided that nothing good would come from keeping Dumbledore's disclosure completely from her. "It's about Occlumency. Dumbledore told me..." He stopped, unsure if he could say it, not wanting her to be angry or disappointed.

"What did he tell you? Harry..." Her eyes seemed to search him, and then widened a little. "Is it that terrible? If... if you don't want to tell me, I'll understand. Honestly, you don't have to tell me everything. I mentioned that in the letter; I... I hope you read it later."

The truth burst out of his mouth. "Snape didn't teach me Occlumency. He didn't even try."

Hermione seemed to be thinking through her response even as she slowly spoke. "There was never a doubt that he was doing a poor job of teaching you... a pathetic job, really... but I don't understand. He was surely attempting to teach you something?"

Harry felt anger, and it was his own. "Oh, he was teaching me something, all right. He taught me Legilimency. He taught me to lash out, and that's all. He lied to me from the start, Hermione. If I could have talked to Dumbledore about it... but of course he wouldn't have anything to do with me!"

"He taught you Legilimency..." she repeated, and then her face flushed red and Harry felt the anger mount. "Every text I've read about Occlumency last year said that Occlumency is taught before Legilimency! What was he thinking? Was he trying to drive you mad?"

"Dumbledore said he was turning me into a weapon," Harry said. "The funny thing is, I would have gone along with it if he'd explained himself."

"Of course! He was fashioning you to be a sort of doomsday..." Hermione gasped and grabbed his shoulders tightly. "Don't you dare let them!" she snapped at him. "Do you hear me, Harry Potter? That's... that's quitting, that's giving up! You can't do that, Harry! You can beat him, you can kill him – you have to kill him – and that doesn't mean he'll be able to do the same!" She turned away to face

the fire, even as her voice continued to rise. “You’ll kill him, and I’ll help you, and I’ll be there to see it, to see you win, to see that monster suffer... for everything he’s done, he has to suffer, and you’ll do it, we’ll do it, I swear, Harry – there’ll be no mercy for him, no prison, no trial, no second chances, nothing, just death, just DEAD –”

Harry’s hands shook as she went on; all he could at last manage to do was to reach out from behind and envelop her, to pull her to him and away from whatever abyss she was staring into, to keep his best friend from falling. It was almost as though he could see her plunging from a tower. She didn’t turn, she didn’t latch onto him, she didn’t cry – she just stiffened in his arms and shook and seared the room with anger and despair. He wasn’t about to let go.

Her voice cracked and trembled. “I could see them, Harry – do you understand? I looked to the front of the carriage and I could see them!”

He sagged inside, but he still didn’t let go. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t you... don’t be sorry,” she sniffed. “You saved Mum and Dad, you saved Ron and Ginny and their family – don’t apologise for that.”

“I was trying to save you,” Harry said quietly.

Hermione went on as though he’d said nothing. “I wasn’t strong enough. I don’t even know if I kept the secret.” She pulled her hand free from his to wipe at her eyes. He kept his other arm around her waist. “That was the only thing I had to do, and I don’t even know if I managed it. I wasn’t strong enough, Harry. Why did you even bother to come tonight?”

“How many people do you know who have been attacked by Voldemort – not by Death Eaters, but Voldemort himself?” Harry asked.

“What point are you trying to make?” Hermione asked sullenly.

“How many?” Harry asked more forcefully.

"You and Ginny, I suppose," she answered.

"Ginny doesn't count," Harry insisted. "It was just a piece of Tom Riddle in that diary; that's not like the real thing, I can promise you. I know of you and me and Dumbledore, and that's it... well, there's Neville's mum and dad, I suppose. Everyone else is dead, Hermione, so don't tell me that you're not strong."

"I would be as well, if you hadn't done... whatever you did. I still don't understand it." She pulled away so that she could face him; her eyes gave away her apprehension. "Harry... I won't lie to you, I can't... I was as afraid of you as I was of him, for a while at least."

"I was deaf afterward," Harry said offhandedly.

Hermione was confused. "You were... what?"

"I couldn't hear anything, not until I went into the kitchen; Dobby healed me then. I was shouting because I couldn't hear myself," Harry explained.

Hermione faced the fire. "I remember you shouting... actually, most of what I remember came from watching it a second time. Voldemort was... he was inside me... and then Wormtail was choking me, and... and then you were there and Wormtail was off of me and I fell back and then I was with my dad and you were moving so fast, Harry... so fast... and there was smoke and steam and... things flying around... and... and then you were covered in blood and you were shouting and then I remember Ron standing by you and then you were gone and I was in my room. Honestly, the next thing I recall is meeting with Madam Bones." She crossed her arms tightly, as though she was warding off the world.

"I don't see anything wrong with being a bit afraid of me," Harry allowed.

Hermione whirled about. "What are you talking about?"

"If you're a bit afraid, maybe a bit worried, then you can keep me on the right lines," Harry explained. "Perhaps it's for the best?"

"Do you need that, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Do you need someone to keep you on the right lines?"

"You've always done that for me," Harry said honestly.

Hermione seemed to relax at that. "I'm not afraid of you now, Harry," she said. "I am worried for you, like it or not. That's why I'm taking tuition from Dumbledore. We're –"

"I know about the research," Harry interjected.

Her eyes narrowed. "What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing at all – he was clear on that," Harry insisted. "He did say that you insisted I know about the research, though."

"I did," she admitted.

Harry smiled. "Watching out for my interests, as well – something else you've always done for me... thank you."

"You don't mind, then?" She hesitated, and then added in a single breath, "I won't do it if you mind. Do you want to be a part of it? It concerns you so directly – perhaps you should work with me?"

"What, on the research? No, thank you!" he said quickly. "First, I'm rubbish for something like that – don't argue the point, right? – and second, the last thing I want to do is to study that. If you're doing it, it'll be done right and I'll find out everything I need to know."

Her eyes glistened in the firelight. "That means a great deal to me, Harry. I know I've let you down, but this... this is something I know how to do. If there's something important to be found, I'll find it – I promise you that. Honestly, I'm looking forward to it... it's the only thing to which I'm looking forward."

The anguish rolled off of her. He said quietly but insistently, "You haven't let me down... and this can't be the only thing that excites you. Surely there's something else –"

Her answer was distant, as though she were lost to the fire. "Tomorrow I'm supposed to put on a student's robe and a blouse and skirt and a House tie and follow a timetable along with everyone sleeping peacefully upstairs. I'm supposed to pretend that the world beyond these walls doesn't exist. I'm supposed to be some sort of innocent child. How am I supposed to do that now?"

"I don't know," Harry sighed. "After all that's happened, I think it's best that I was dismissed." He looked up the stairs. "I'm not one of them anymore, I know that. It sounds as though you feel the same. I imagine Ron feels a spot of it as well."

"I don't know if I can pretend," Hermione said. "That's why I chose to give up my prefect appointment. Don't misunderstand me... it's not that I've given myself over to chaos. It's just that an honorific is meaningless. I have better things to do with my time, much more important things."

Harry almost brought up her argument with McGonagall, but caught himself. "Erm... have you told Dumbledore about this?" he asked instead.

"I'm sure that's why he offered special tuition," she pointed out.

"I think you should talk to him," Harry suggested. "I'm not sure what he might do, and I'm not telling you to trust him completely – I certainly don't, not anymore – but he really does seem to care about you."

After a pause and a long sigh, she said, "He cares about you as well, very much. I'll give it some thought." She looked him in the eyes, and he was confused by what he felt; then she added, "There's so much I want to say, that I want to tell you... I'm just so tired. I'm sorry."

“Don’t be sorry; it’s late,” he insisted. “Are we... are we all right, Hermione?” She nodded and hugged him fiercely. It seemed strange to be hugged by her without being awash in her hair.

“Has Dumbledore given you a timetable?” Hermione asked without releasing him.

Harry shook his head. “I’m starting to think it’s going to be something of a lash-up. Um... if you copy yours for me, then at least I’ll know where to find you.”

“We’ll receive ours in the morning, of course,” she said. “If you come by the Great Hall during one of the meals, I can give a copy to you.”

The idea of entering the Great Hall to a crowd of students made his stomach clench, but he smiled and nodded anyway. “I’ll do that,” he promised.

She nodded and then let her head fall against his shoulder, which he didn’t expect in the slightest. He absently ran his hand up and down her back in a way he hoped was comforting. “Thank you for coming tonight,” she said.

“We’re friends; that’s what friends do, right?” he said in return.

“Best friends, Harry... best friends,” she said earnestly, and he nodded in agreement as they parted.

He left the Common Room as soon as she climbed up the stairs and out of sight. On his way to the main entry, he rummaged through his pockets for the Bonnie until he recalled that it sat in his wardrobe. There was movement here and there in the shadows as he walked toward Hogsmeade. It’s probably a flock of minders, he figured, but palmed his wand nonetheless.

He hadn’t even reached the gates before he decided that the path seemed much narrower in the darkness. He heard rustling close to his right, and fired a stunning charm into the brush without second thought. There was no sound of a body falling, only a blizzard of birds in all directions. He whispered for Moody, then Tonks and then

Shacklebolt, but only heard the fading rush of the birds and the chirping of insects in return.

Even after he reached his rooms, he couldn't place for certain what had driven him to start singing; it might have been the pleasure of knowing that he still had his best friend after all that had happened, or it might have been a fraying of nerves. He had been prone to having songs run through his head for a while – another legacy of Sirius, thanks to his record collection. Harry hoped that the first words were accurate, as he let forth at the top of his lungs:

What would you think if I sang out of tune?

Would you stand up and walk out on me?

Lend me your ears and I'll sing you a song,

And I'll try not to sing out of key.

He nearly laughed at the thought that he was probably well out of key, and then at the image of Death Eaters in the woods cringing at every word. He ploughed on even though he knew that he'd forgotten some of the words:

I get by with a little help from my friends,

I get by with a little help from my friends,

Going to try with a little help from my friends.

What do I do when my... blah-blah-blah-blah?

He couldn't hold back the laughter anymore, and the shadows didn't seem quite so daunting. "That's it!" he howled; "I'll kill him with my bloody singing!" When he finally caught his breath, he sang on:

Does it worry you to be alone?

How do I feel at the end of the day?



Are you sad because you're on your own?

NO! I get by with a little help from my friends.

Do you need anybody?

I need somebody to...er...

The gaslights of Hogsmeade emerged before him as he cleared the trees. There was lightness to his step as he strolled toward the Three Broomsticks, still singing. He caught a peculiar stare or two, and didn't care a whit:

I get by with a little help from my friends,

Yes I get by with a little help from my friends,

I get by with a little help... Yes I get with a little help...

I get by with a little help from my friends.

Madam Rosmerta was setting glassware behind the bar; at the sight of her, he quickly stopped and felt a flush rise to his cheeks. She smiled at him and said, "Don't let me stop you; you're spot on, Harry."

\* \* \* \* \*

Acknowledgments:

Lennon, J. & McCartney, P. (1967). "With a little help from my friends", from Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. London: EMI Records.

## Chapter Thirty-three

### OTHER KNOWS BEST

September 2, 1996

Harry's shout could have roused every sleeping wizard in Hogsmeade, and he wouldn't have cared – his watch read fifteen minutes to nine and he was supposed to be in Dumbledore's chambers at nine, but he'd been too thick to pick up an alarm clock, and his stomach was rumbling, and he sat there on the edge of the bed with his hair in disarray even by his normal standards, clad only in boxers. He knocked Hermione's letter – which he had read several times before falling asleep – onto the floor in his haste, and scrambled to the sink.

"My, you're a fright this morning," the mirror said.

"Sod off," Harry grumbled, and thrust his toothbrush into his mouth. Hermione had once told him with a straight face that he needed to spend half a minute on each tooth, and he'd actually done it once before he found out that she'd been having him on. As it was, there was barely time to rinse-and-spit, and then a scouring charm that felt like it stripped off his skin rather than cleansed it.

He donned a grey shirt, pulled on black trousers that tucked into black boots, and thrust his black student's cloak and robe into a black knapsack – and managed it all in less than two minutes. "Is your entire wardrobe monochromatic, young man?" the mirror asked as he struggled with his hair.

"Bloody mirrors," Harry muttered under his breath. He tossed aside his comb in surrender, checked that he had packed parchment and quills and ink, scooped up the Bonnie and dashed out the door for the stairs.

He nearly ran down Madam Rosmerta as he reached the landing. "Oh, dear!" she cried out. "No time for breakfast?"

“Have to meet Dumbledore at nine,” he said quickly.

Rosmerta pointed to two platters set at the bar. “Take a scone at the very least, Harry. Good luck today!”

Harry thanked her and pocketed two scones. He stopped just beyond the front door and enlarged the Bonnie; it was second nature for him now, and he supposed that it looked to an observer as though the motorbike simply poured from his palm. He straddled the bike in one smooth motion and cranked the throttle once, savouring the growl. Eyes fell upon him and glanced over his shoulder; heads seemed to magically appear at windows and out of abruptly-opened doors.

An ancient wizard making for the Three Broomsticks stopped beside him, eyes widened. “Great Merlin’s ghost, it’s Sirius Black!” he wheezed; “When’d they let you out, boy?” Harry flinched and mumbled a vague pleasantry over the rumble of the bike, then turned hard and pulled away fast.

Another wizard scrambled out of the way and shook his fist as Harry passed. He was past Hogsmeade Station before he became conscious of the wind whipping his hair; it was too late to turn back for a helmet. It’s not as though I’ll have a traffic accident here, he figured.

The gates to Hogwarts opened as he approached; he didn’t recall them having been closed when he’d walked back the previous night. As he thought about it, Dumbledore had never said anything about the gates at all; somehow, Harry was recognised.

He picked up speed again. The roar of the Bonnie seemed terribly out of place, especially as the castle drew closer, and he smiled. He figured that the sound of a Muggle motor had never been heard on this path before, even if it was nothing more than a magical copy of the real thing. There was something satisfying about riding the Bonnie on the ground, roaring up the path to Hogwarts – something exciting and rebellious and his alone.

The empty Quidditch pitch called to him. He glanced at his watch, which read six minutes to nine, and told himself, I can round it and

still make the entrance in two minutes. The roar of the Bonnie faded away as he took flight. He hadn't gone flat out since the chase to catch Ginny, and the speed startled him. It was as fast as his Firebolt, but the ride was rough and the Bonnie was far more difficult to hold steady. He had to stand on the footpegs to snap around the hoops at the far end of the pitch, and even then came uncomfortably close to sideswiping the wall. Four minutes to nine, his watch read. He turned the throttle as far as it would turn and thundered toward the entrance to the castle.

Harry swooped over a low spot in the outer walls and streaked down into the courtyard; he had to let the Bonnie bounce and slide through a 180-degree turn in order to stop. He heard the muttering of the startled students before he actually saw them.

It's a Muggle! Inconceivable!

Don't be thick; the thing was flying.

Charming that bike's worth a year in Azkaban, I'll wager.

Harry dismounted and found himself face to face with a shuffling knot of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, fifth-years from the looks of them. He guessed that they were straggling to Hagrid's hut for Care of Magical Creatures. "Good morning," he said casually, as though flying into the Hogwarts courtyard at a hundred miles an hour on a Triumph Bonneville was as perfectly ordinary as scones for breakfast.

"Merlin's balls, it's Harry Potter!" someone blurted from the back, which immediately provoked alternating fits of laughter and shushing.

"Good morning, Harry. Were you taking a morning constitutional?" a familiar sing-song voice called out. Luna stood well off to one side from the rest of the students.

"Shut it, Looney," came a hiss.

Harry's jaw clenched. He shrunk and pocketed the Bonnie, which brought forth gasps; then he summoned a broad smile and returned,

"Hello, Luna. It's great to see you again." The second round of gasps from Luna's year-mates was rather more pronounced.

"Thank you once again for allowing Daddy and me to stay with you," Luna said. There were whispers and sharp mutters, and Harry could almost feel Luna's fellow Ravenclaws calculating. Prats! he snarled inside, and quickly decided that he had a good reason for keeping the Headmaster waiting.

"It was my pleasure," Harry said softly. Luna's wide eyes flickered ever-so-slightly, which he took as a note of surprise. "Perhaps you'll take another ride with me sometime?" he added.

"I'd like that," Luna replied. "I enjoyed the last ride immensely, although the stroll afterward was even better."

Harry gave her a warm and friendly embrace. She stiffened for an instant, and then yielded. Harry couldn't feel the other Ravenclaws after that. A catty thought flitted through his mind: Perhaps we've killed them?

"You're quite skilled at play-acting," she whispered in his ear.

"Play-acting? No, I really am glad to see you," he whispered in return. "Er... I need to talk with you soon... it's about Hermione. I saw her last night." Then he let Luna go and took a step back as though he was appraising her. "I'm late to see the Headmaster," he added in a normal voice. "I'll be sure to pass along your regards." She nodded and smiled enigmatically.

Luna's housemates stared in mute shock as Harry walked toward them on his way to the oaken doors. He stopped before them, knowing that Luna might not appreciate what he was about to do. "Luna stood with me and my other friends against a dozen Death Eaters," he snapped. "My friends are loyal to me, and I'm loyal to them. If I find you've mistreated Luna, having Cho take away house points will be the least of your worries." He stood firm and watched the implication soak in for an uncomfortably long moment, and then continued on his way. From the corner of his eye, he observed that

Luna's housemates still stood in shock while her Hufflepuff year-mates smiled as one.

Harry pushed quickly through the doors and very nearly ran into Dumbledore. He was so startled that he managed nothing more intelligible than "Oh!"

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore greeted him. "I was watching for you from my window." He looked Harry up and down. "Sirius's mode of transportation always fascinated me; it seems to favour you."

Harry's cheeks flushed despite himself. "I should have come directly, but I just had to take a spin around the pitch... I know it was childish..."

"I know that you will miss Quidditch very much," Dumbledore said. "I suspect that you would have arrived precisely as scheduled, were it not for the time required to address Miss Lovegood and her colleagues."

Harry frowned. "I won't let them treat her badly, not like last year."

Dumbledore seemed to be quite surprised. "Miss Lovegood has been poorly treated by members of her own house? I was not aware of this."

"I don't think she ever told any of the professors, not even Flitwick," Harry said. "She didn't want a fuss."

"She didn't want a fuss, you say?" Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I see... then you acted in what you perceive to be Miss Lovegood's best interests, even though she does not share your opinion."

"They steal her things, they call her awful names, they lie to her about revising for exams – she's done nothing to deserve that," Harry protested.

"What if your action leads to unforeseen consequences, Harry? Perhaps Miss Lovegood's colleagues will be emboldened to seek

new and uglier ways to mistreat her? Would that lead you to reconsider your actions?" Dumbledore asked.

"Someone needed to talk to them. Someone had to tell them that what they've done before is wrong." Harry crossed his arms tightly. "If I say nothing, nothing changes; so I said something."

Dumbledore gave a wry smile, and showed a hint of the twinkle in his eye that Harry had come to genuinely dislike. "It is always tempting to make decisions on behalf of those for whom we care, but always dangerous. The future consequences are never completely clear in the best of circumstances. Sometimes we cannot remedy our errors, but only move forward." He motioned toward the corridor that led past the ground-floor classrooms. "Shall we?"

They exited the corridor into the main entry hall and Dumbledore turned toward the stairs that led to the dungeons. Harry slowed his pace. "Are we... um... going down there to, you know, talk to him?"

"I believe that we both require some more information from our colleague, prior to passing judgment," Dumbledore returned. "I offer to handle the enquiry, unless you prefer otherwise." Since Harry had no idea what information Dumbledore sought, he agreed.

As they descended, Dumbledore seemed lost in his thoughts. He doffed his hat and ran the brim through his hands as he walked. A smile formed on his lips. "Unspoken communication, Harry – it is critical to effective partnerships," he said. "Many tasks in the magical world are carried out in pairs; Aurors generally work in pairs, as do Unspeakables in the field... curse-breakers as well... even the Four Founders formed two pairs. I wonder if we overlook the significance of partnership and teamwork at Hogwarts...?"

Before Harry could decide whether he should answer, Dumbledore went on, "Unspoken communication... yes, it can provide a valuable advantage. When Professor Croaker and myself – I imagine that you did not know the Professor has been a superior and a colleague of mine at various times? – when we were engaged in fieldwork, we had

a system of unspoken cues in addition to simple familiarity. For example, if I was to rub the side of my nose thusly, Algernon knew that someone with hostile intent was attempting to flank him.” He tugged in a particular way on his beard. “If I was to pull on my beard just-so, then Algernon knew to secure a room – in other words, to securely seal the door, scatter Imperturbable Charms and create a silent space of appropriate dimensions. You surely see how these sorts of cues could be useful in an uncertain situation? Yes, I think that unspoken communication should be addressed in both the Defence classes and the Defence Club –”

“Defence Club? Is Detheridge going to run something like the D.A., then?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore straightened his hat and returned it to its normal perch. “No, Harry. You are going to lead the Defence Club, with able assistance of course. I believe that such a Club should conduct its meetings on a regular basis, and there will be times that you are unavailable.”

“Erm... I don’t think Hermione –” Harry began.

Dumbledore interrupted firmly. “Miss Granger has been charged with a more important task, one better suited to her current situation. No, I prefer that you work with Professor Detheridge’s teaching assistants. I will arrange a meeting with his assistants this afternoon. Ah... we have arrived.” They stood before the door to the Potions classroom.

Dumbledore knocked twice and then entered. The classroom was vacant, and the door to Snape’s office was ajar. “Severus? Do you have a moment?” Dumbledore called cheerily.

Snape’s voice echoed from the office. “I am engaged. I shall be with you shortly, Headmaster.”

“There is no need to ruin a potion,” Dumbledore said quietly. He ran the tip of his index finger along the top of one of the student desks, and his nose wrinkled; then he sniffed deeply. “Fluxweed has a very distinctive scent when parboiled. It is primarily acrid, yet at the same time there is a hint of something floral.”



Harry sniffed the air as well. "Fluxweed? Why is he making Polyjuice Potion?" he muttered.

Dumbledore frowned. "Although fluxweed is used in several preparations, it is a rather esoteric ingredient. I am inclined to support your assumption. Professor Snape is expected to inform the Order of his, shall we say, unsavoury potion-making responsibilities... you pose an excellent question, Harry. I shall add it to my growing list."

Snape emerged from his office. His outer robe was absent, replaced by a dragon-hide apron, and he was wiping his hands on what looked to be a tea towel. "My apologies, Headmaster – I..." His eyes swept to Dumbledore's right and narrowed. "What is he doing here? Is this about his Potions training?"

"I do hope this will not come as a disappointment, Severus, but I have decided to offer Harry tuition in potions myself," Dumbledore said.

Snape's face twitched oddly; Harry suspected it was from the effort of keeping back a smile. "I am... not entirely disappointed, Headmaster..." He paused and shifted uncomfortably. "Without intending disrespect, may I ask if you are certain that you will be able to address all aspects that may be required? I will offer any assistance that you require, of course."

"Of course, Severus; I am aware of your commitment to the betterment of our students," Dumbledore said evenly. "I am certain that you would extend the same courtesies to my apprentice. Though I am not a Potions Master, but merely an alchemist, I feel that I can provide Harry with all the potions instruction that he shall require."

Snape lowered his head. "You are not merely an alchemist, Headmaster. No insult was intended."

"None was taken," Dumbledore said. "I have a lesson plan in mind, Severus, and I shall need to obtain the associated materials. If it is not an imposition, I thought that perhaps you could provide initial supplies from your personal stores. In addition, I would prefer that

you handle future procurements on my behalf; in that way, we shall be guaranteed highest-quality supplies.”

“Certainly, Headmaster,” Snape agreed.

Dumbledore moved toward Snape’s office. “Excellent! Now, I had in mind –”

Snape moved to one side, deterring Dumbledore’s progress. “I can outfit a small potions laboratory on your behalf, Headmaster,” he said. “Dungeon Five is not in use this term, and the conditions are favourable for potions of NEWT-level sensitivity. When did you intend to commence this... training?”

“I had hoped to offer a brief lesson this afternoon, one that should not necessitate a special environment,” Dumbledore returned. He resumed his trek toward the office. “I only require –”

“Headmaster, I have four different potions brewing at present, two of which are prone to instability. I would prefer that no one else enter my laboratory until tomorrow at the earliest,” Snape said, his tone authoritative and firm.

Dumbledore let out a long sigh. “Very well; would you please fetch the appropriate supplies, then?” He adjusted his hat and then tugged on his beard. “I shall require six Jobberknoll feathers...”

Snape’s face went slack. “Six, Headmaster? I doubt that I have six available –”

Dumbledore went on as though Snape had said nothing. “I shall also require a vial of Erumpent fluid, six grains of coracesia –”

“Sir! I must insist that you allow me to prepare Dungeon Five before you allow... are you certain that you want to put coracesia in Potter’s hands?” Snape sneered. “I will admit he hasn’t engaged in wanton cauldron-melting like Longbottom ...” Dumbledore tugged on his beard again, as Snape droned on. Harry realised that it was the same sort of tug as before – the same unspoken cue that the Headmaster had once shared with Croaker.

Dumbledore continued to list increasingly dangerous ingredients, Snape continued to grow paler, and Harry understood that he was supposed to secure the room while Snape was distracted. With a furtive flick of his wand, he sealed the door. Snape was so incensed that he didn't seem to hear the faint squelching sound. With a few more flicks, the walls and ceiling and floor were all rendered Imperturbable. He flopped onto a bench as though bored, and Snape never gave him a second glance. Lying on his back, he moved his wand to-and-fro, and built a silent space that enclosed the entire classroom.

"Do any of your potions require attention in the next fifteen minutes, Severus?" Dumbledore asked.

"The Blood-Replenishing Potion must be stirred in less than ten minutes," Snape answered. His eyes flickered slightly. "Do you require something of me other than potion ingredients, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I do." He sniffed deeply. "Are you certain you have fifteen minutes to spare? I believe your fluxweed may be softening into an unusable state."

Snape sniffed, "Certainly not; it will be more than thirty minutes..." His face tightened, and he took a long pause before he said, "I did not think that this particular request merited the attention of the Order. I am being made to accelerate the brewing process, and I assure you that the potion will work for no more than ten minutes. Whoever will be assigned to use it is doomed to failure."

Dumbledore's eyes flashed dangerously. "We had an understanding, Severus – an agreement that you would report all of your activities for Voldemort and his supporters. This was not limited to those activities that you may feel are important. Ten minutes is ample time for unspeakable acts to be committed – you know this all too well."

Snape bowed his head. "I understand, Headmaster. I did not seek to overstep my bounds; the error is mine."

"Yes, Severus, the error is yours," Dumbledore agreed. He turned to Harry. "I have another minor question to ask of Professor Snape. I am sorry that we are encroaching on your lesson time... ah, of course! Harry, I would like you to go into Professor Snape's office and, without sampling or any sort of direct contact, identify the four potions currently in process. If you succeed in identifying all four, I shall award ten points to the house of your choosing."

Snape was horror-stricken. "Headmaster... I must protest! If he interacts with my work, not only might he reduce himself to ashes, but he might succeed in taking us with him!"

"Thank you for the warning, Severus," Dumbledore said. "Harry, it seems that one or more of the potions possesses an explosive potential; do be mindful in your examination." He waved toward Snape's office door until Harry began to move toward it.

Snape drew himself up into the haughty posture that Harry expected of him. "Headmaster, as an accredited Potions Master I possess certain rights and privileges with regard to the sanctity of my work," he sniffed. "I refuse to allow someone so thoroughly unqualified to enter my work area."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed in a way that Harry had never before seen. A draft rushed through the room; the Headmaster's hat fell to the floor and his hair rippled behind him. "Any privileges that you possess within these walls are based upon your tenure as a Professor, Severus, and the continuation of that tenure is at my pleasure," he pronounced. "I believe we shall discuss the likelihood of continuation, among other things. Sit."

Harry barely managed to move aside; he suddenly felt incredibly heavy. Snape slid backward into the chair behind his desk at the head of the classroom; his expression betrayed utter shock and fear. Once Snape was seated, he tugged and pulled and wriggled but might as well have been tied down.

"What is the meaning of this?" Snape demanded.

“Have you betrayed the Order, Severus?” Dumbledore roared. The student desks rattled in their places. Harry wasn’t certain whether the desks and benches rattled from the strength of Dumbledore’s voice or the sheer power radiating from him; he couldn’t help but be awestruck, as well as shocked by the turn of events, and very pleased to be someone other than Severus Snape.

Snape’s eyes grew wide before they grew angry. “No! How... how dare you! After all that I have done, all that I have given... NO, I HAVE NOT!”

Harry could feel the Headmaster’s fury roiling just beneath the surface. Dumbledore withdrew his wand and rolled it between his fingers. When he at last spoke, his tone was controlled but bitterly cold. “I am inclined to test that assertion. I have received approval to cast Proditionis Aequiparabilis.”

Snape blanched, but responded with defiance. “You would invoke the Betrayer’s Curse upon me, Headmaster? From whom was permission sought – your Gryffindor protégés? I surmise as much; they would happily allow you to strike me with the Killing Curse,” he spat.

“This is not a matter of likes or dislikes; the matters at hand are the keeping and the breaking of oaths, of long-held personal promises,” Dumbledore returned. “I will know whether you have betrayed Harry to Voldemort. You will tell me or I will discern it myself.”

Snape tried to sit up straight, but it seemed that he was forced into a slouch. “This is about Potter? Do I not sit accused of betraying the Order?”

“There is no longer a distinction to be drawn, as you are well aware,” Dumbledore snapped. “There have been too many inconsistencies, too many half-truths, Severus. I can no longer tolerate obfuscation. Resist if you wish. Legilimens.”

Snape writhed in the chair; he tried to turn his head, to avert his eyes, but he could not. The veins in his neck bulged, and he began to

sweat profusely; Harry wondered whether he was seeing Snape as Snape had seen him the previous year.

“I... was... I was in the right!” Snape choked out. “Did... what... you asked... the boy... couldn’t use Occlumency... doesn’t... possess... the mind... had to make him... resist the... the Dark Lord... as you said... why not... make him... strike a... hammer blow...”

“You were completely wrong,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Harry is not a weapon to be wielded.”

“We... are all... weapons...” Snape managed.

Dumbledore seemed profoundly sad and disappointed; Harry could feel it and wondered if it was having any effect on Snape. “Severus... your actions were premised upon a distorted view of the connection between Harry and Voldemort. We can only hope that you did not succeed in dooming us all...” The Headmaster’s eyes fluttered and he staggered forward. Harry moved to his side, but he raised a hand to stop him. “Harry, please remove yourself to Professor Snape’s office. I still wish you to identify the potions in process – quickly, please.”

“Blood... Replenishing... P-Potion...” Snape said hoarsely.

“Thank you, Severus. The Blood Replenishing Potion will soon require stirring. Harry, be certain to follow the Professor’s notes with care,” Dumbledore said.

“NO... Potter... m-menace ...” Snape spat. His head shook, and then he squeezed his eyes tightly shut. “Headmuh... Headmaster... no... don’t make me... I don’t want to see... please...” His eyes snapped open again, pupils contracted in stark terror.

“Oh, no... Severus, did he actually require you to do those things...?” Dumbledore muttered, and then added forcefully, “Harry, act with haste!”

Harry scrambled into Snape’s office. There were four cauldrons brewing, each with a store of ingredients before it, all carefully

organized and meticulously prepared. A set of notes on parchment was placed adjacent to each ingredient set; stirring and brewing steps were logged on each. He struggled to clear his head; the air was filled with fear and disappointment and anger and the crackling of raw power, and it was a battle to push all that aside and focus upon his task.

He first identified the cauldron in which the Blood Replenishing Potion was brewing, and followed Snape's next steps exactly as they were described. Boomslang skin lay amongst the ingredients before the second cauldron, and the liquid gave off the odour that Dumbledore had identified as fluxweed. That would be the Polyjuice Potion, he recognised.

The liquid in the third cauldron was clear, and the only remaining ingredient was a single Jobberknoll feather. He leaned over the cauldron and sniffed; there was no discernable smell. There was a stray droplet on the edge of the cauldron. He threw caution to the wind and took up the droplet on the tip of a finger; his skin tingled for a moment. Veritaserum, he decided.

Only traces of the ingredients remained before the fourth cauldron. Harry read the notes several times, in hopes of seeing a familiar pattern in the clockwise and anticlockwise stirring and the addition of tincture of... Forgetfulness Potion? Why on Earth would he be brewing that? he wondered.

"I have it, Headmaster," Harry called out. "He's brewing Blood Replenishing Potion, Polyjuice Potion, Veritaserum, and Forgetfulness Potion."

Dumbledore released a long sigh. When Harry re-entered the classroom, the Headmaster was seated at a student desk, his face lowered into his hands; Snape was sprawled in the chair behind his own desk, dazed and shuddering. When Dumbledore at last spoke, his voice was muffled by his fingers. "I assume that Harry is correct, because it is abundantly clear that you have been partaking of Forgetfulness Potion. That is not the answer, Severus."

Snape coughed loudly. "Perhaps I was able to penetrate Potter's skull after all," he croaked. "Ten points to... to..."

"Slytherin," Harry said.

Snape remained slouched in his chair, but his eyes betrayed his surprise. "I... m-must have heard incorrectly."

"Ten points to Slytherin," Harry confirmed.

Snape's eyebrow quivered as it rose. "What on Earth for?"

A part of Harry wanted very much to smirk, but the rest of him couldn't deliver on it. Instead he snapped, "I figure Slytherin will need the points before the year is out, and... and because I would have gone along with it. Did you ever think about that? Did it ever occur to you that if you'd just told me what you were trying to do, I might have agreed?"

Snape gaped at him. He was silent for a long time, before he whispered, "Foolish, foolish Gryffindor."

"I'd have gone along with it, if it would have gotten rid of Voldemort," Harry growled. "Who's the fool here, Snape?"

Dumbledore raised his head. "I will not hear of this again, Harry. As for you, Severus... you have been found out; Voldemort knows. He assigned you the most reprehensible tasks – evil tasks – because he knew that you would perform them; he knew that you would not dare fail him, no matter the consequences. It appears that he was not able to breach your deepest secrets, but the Forgetfulness Potion has eroded your shields over time – as you surely knew it would. Did you truly believe that Voldemort would not sense this? You should have come to me; this could have ended weeks ago! Lives would have been saved – innocent lives!" The Headmaster rippled with power, and Harry understood how it was that he could be feared.

Snape bore himself up with obvious discomfort but without any note of complaint. "Shall I consider myself in custody, Headmaster?"



Dumbledore shook his head. "I am satisfied that you have not knowingly betrayed the Order. I am, however, profoundly dissatisfied with your conduct. As of now, you are forbade from responding to a summons, nor may you leave the wards of Hogwarts for any purpose until I am convinced that it is safe for you to do so. I shall confer with Harry as well as some of our colleagues from the Order. We shall meet with you no later than tomorrow evening."

Snape struggled to his feet; his eyes were still glassy. "The third-years will be arriving in thirty minutes... I must..."

"You need not concern yourself," Dumbledore said firmly. "I relieve you of instructional duties until further notice. You may use your office and private work area, if you wish. Your Floo access is suspended, as well."

Snape began a weak protest. "But who will —"

Dumbledore stopped him. "As you pointed out, I am not merely an alchemist." He turned to Harry. "I am afraid that my meagre attempts toward establishing a timetable have once again collapsed. I would appreciate your assistance in preparing the classroom and monitoring student activity. You will meet with Professor Detheridge's assistants this afternoon, and there are two readings that you must complete today. We will meet over the evening meal to organise the remainder of the week."

"Is there... anything that I may do, Headmaster; any task that I may perform?" Snape asked quietly.

"You may complete the potions in process, Severus," Dumbledore answered. "Please see that the Blood-Replenishing Potion is delivered to Madam Pomfrey, and that the Veritaserum is delivered to my chambers. You shall complete and then destroy the Polyjuice Potion in my presence. I shall destroy the Forgetfulness Potion myself and remove the active tincture from your stores." When Snape simply stood there, he added, "The balance of your attention this day and tomorrow should be devoted to thorough and sober reflection upon your choices." The Headmaster watched impassively until Snape recognised the dismissal and slunk into his office.

Dumbledore sat against the edge of the teacher's desk and seemed to survey the classroom for a moment. "Third years... third years... what say you, Harry – shall we begin with the Draught of Peace?"

"Erm... that's covered in fifth year. Snape said it was tricky," Harry offered.

Dumbledore looked at him with faint surprise. "Is that so? In my day, the associated skills were of the third year, or the fourth year at worst. Well... no matter. I believe the Draught of Peace is very appropriate for today's lesson. Please obtain the proper supplies for twenty-five students from the potions stores, Harry. While you are readying the ingredients..." He rose up and strolled down the centre aisle, wrinkling his nose all the while. "This classroom could stand a proper scouring." With that, the Headmaster began directing various cleaning charms at the desks, the chairs, even the walls and floor.

When Harry returned with the ingredients for the impending class he found Dumbledore standing before the sidewall, staring at the stone with some intensity. "A rather dark and dismal room, wouldn't you say?" he seemed to ask the wall.

"I always figured it was for the ingredients or something," Harry admitted; "I supposed it had to be dark and cold."

Dumbledore laughed. "Stuff and nonsense!" he declared. "There are no ingredients used in the instructional setting that fail to thrive at normal indoor temperatures, or under lighting that falls within the normal spectrum. When I was a lad, a Ravenclaw held the Potions post and the classes were held in Ravenclaw tower. No, Harry, this classroom is a reflection of the Professor's personal preferences and nothing more." He stepped back from the wall until he nearly toppled a student desk. "Now it is true that certain categories of ambient magic can impact adversely upon the brewing of a variety of potions. Enchanted windows do not emanate that sort of magical energy." The Headmaster gave his wand a terribly complicated wave and muttered something that didn't sound to Harry like it came from any language he had ever heard, let alone any incantation. A very large portion of the sidewall brightened and then shimmered. When the shimmering

stopped, it appeared as though the classroom had been transported up into one of the towers; a full set of windows and French doors opened onto a balcony that overlooked the grounds.

Harry attempted to touch the handles of the doors, and found that they were simply part of the enchantment. "Brilliant!" he said with a grin.

"It is more to my taste, at any rate. We shall see if the students share your assessment," Dumbledore said. With that, Harry set the morning's raw ingredients at the worktables while the Headmaster rapidly jotted teaching notes in the air.

Over the next two periods, Harry at last had an opportunity to weigh Dumbledore as a teacher. There couldn't have been a greater contrast to Snape, he decided. The Headmaster was calm, patient, brilliant, and above all else, fair-minded. Even the Slytherin third-years whom he overheard while leaving the classroom spoke highly of the session.

Harry followed the students up the stairs and into the Great Hall, where the midday meal was in full swing. He automatically took a seat at the Gryffindor table. Several younger students who he didn't recognise cast strange looks toward him.

"How goes the battle, Harry?" Dean asked brightly.

Seamus snorted. "Whatever you're doing, it has to be better than Transfiguration. That class is going to be a thorn in my –"

Katie Bell, who had taken a seat opposite Harry, cut off Seamus with a wave. She subtly inclined her head toward the staff table. McGonagall was delivering a stern stare. Seamus cringed at first; he was slow to realise that the look was meant for Harry. Marchbanks and Croaker were both frowning slightly and Flitwick appeared very interested in what was to come next. McGonagall turned to face an empty seat to her left, and then returned her eyes to Harry.

Harry stood just as Hermione sat. Her wan smile quickly faded in confusion. Harry gave a slight shrug. He looked briefly to McGonagall,

muttered something vaguely apologetic to his former housemates, and then made for the anteroom as fast as he could manage without appearing to run away.

He closed the doors behind him and sat there alone for a while. It was a quiet room, and he could avoid the students' stares. With a quiet pop! a house elf appeared before him. "Does the Headmaster's esteemed apprentice wish to eat?" the house elf asked, nearly cowering before him

Harry sighed. "I just can't eat out there. I don't belong at the staff table and I guess I can't sit with Gryffindor now... I'm glad I'm here, but I don't belong here. Does that make any sense?"

The house-elf's ears quivered. "If the Headmaster's esteemed apprentice is saying it, then... then it must make sense."

Harry laughed. "I wouldn't place a wager on that! Look... my name is Harry. I'm not an esteemed anything."

The house-elf gaped at him with huge and confused eyes. "Begging pardon from the Headmaster's esteemed apprentice, but the esteemed apprentice is not telling the truth! The house-elves, we know who the esteemed apprentice is!"

"What's your name?" Harry asked.

The house-elf twitched. "The Headmaster's esteemed apprentice asks this lowly being's name?" When Harry nodded, the house-elf squeaked, "Spat... the house-elf's name is Spat."

"Well, thank you for offering me a meal, Spat. I'm not very hungry..." Harry chuckled and added in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'd take a butterbeer, if you can give me one... but only if you'll call me by my name."

Spat nearly tore his ears from his head. "C-call you... this lowly being could not... could never..."

Harry frowned, and said firmly, "Please stop calling yourself a lowly being, Spat. My name is Harry. I suspect you can say it just fine." He didn't want to cause the poor creature distress, but he wasn't interested in being treated as anyone's master.

"This lowly... Spat will bring H-H..." The house-elf struggled mightily, and finally squeezed its eyes shut. "Spat will bring butterbeer to Master Harry straight away," he squeaked in a single breath and promptly disappeared.

The door opened with a prolonged creak, and Hermione peered inside. She looked to the left and then to the right before she entered the room. "I wasn't sure if I was allowed..." she began.

"Consider yourself allowed," Harry said quickly, and gestured to the adjacent armchair.

Hermione sat down heavily. "I was concerned," she said. "The look on your face out there... it's difficult for you, isn't it: being here but not being a part of the house?"

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," Harry admitted. "I was going to sit by you, but I thought bloody McGonagall was going to have my head over it. Croaker was giving me the eye, besides."

"You shouldn't have to be alone," Hermione said flatly. "I think it's poor planning on the Headmaster's part."

Spat reappeared, with a butterbeer on a small tray. "Spat returns with butterbeer for Master... eek!" The house-elf's arm shook and he nearly dropped the tray. He swiftly handed Harry the butterbeer and slowly backed away.

Harry looked around anxiously, his wand drawn. "Spat? What is it... what do you see?"

Spat shuddered and shook his head. "She-Who-Knits! Spat mustn't talk to She-Who-Knits, it's not seemly..." He wagged his finger at Hermione. "No hats, miss, if you please... no hats!" he squeaked and then disappeared.

Hermione sat quite still, her eyes wide. Harry cleared his throat, and spoke with no idea of what to say. "Hermione... he just doesn't, erm, appreciate –"

"They... they hate me..." Hermione said haltingly.

Harry didn't know what to say. "I don't know that they hate you, exactly," he bumbled. "I mean, it's only one house-elf; perhaps..." He trailed off as Hermione's cheeks flushed.

Hermione's lip quivered. "They have a name for me! I can't believe they call me... they call me... 'She-Who-Knits'? For goodness' sake, they... they equate me to V-Vol..." Her breathing quickened and threatened to speed out of control.

"No! I'm sure they don't, not really!" Harry insisted. He scooted his chair along the floor until he was near enough to rest his hand on her back. "It's just... I think it's right to want them to be free. I think it's wrong to treat anyone like a slave. I just don't think it's as simple as you wanted it to be."

Hermione crouched forward and buried her head in her hands. "I know that. I don't know what I was thinking at times, especially last year. I think it was Umbridge and... and everything else, you know?" She let out a punctuated sigh, and added, "It's not as though I could free a house-elf bound to Hogwarts; only Professor Dumbledore could do that."

"Even so, they weren't happy about the hats," Harry acknowledged.

Hermione sat up so fast that Harry's arm was flung back. "You knew!" she accused. "I don't believe it! You knew they called me –"

Harry began to babble. "No! I mean... erm... we didn't really know anything – that is, uh, Ron and me, we knew that none of the house-elves but Dobby would come into Gryffindor Tower –"

"I spent all that time making a fool of myself! Why didn't you tell me?" Hermione snapped.

“You had something to believe in and I wasn’t going to be the one to take it away, right?” Harry shot back without a moment’s thought. Hermione immediately shrank back, and Harry’s eyes slammed shut. He took long breaths and tried to sort Hermione’s fear from his own irritation. He felt her hand cover his.

She sniffed loudly, and he vowed not to open his eyes and see her cry. “I’m sorry... I’m very sorry,” she said. “You were trying to be... I should have given you the benefit of the doubt, but... considering last year...”

“I was hard to be around last year, I know,” Harry sighed. “I don’t want to be like that anymore. Sometimes I feel so out of control, you know, and – what?” He was sure that he had felt her flinch.

“It’s nothing.” She continued to sniff, but her voice took on a note of determination. It sounded like the Hermione he knew. “You have to try as hard as you can, Harry. It’s very important – you have to remain in control. I’ll help you any way I can, I promise, but you have to be in control.”

“I know that,” he said. “I know what happens when I’m not in control. You could have been killed on account of that dream. You’ve every right to be concerned.”

Hermione left her hand rest lightly on the collar of his robes; she stood close enough that he could feel her breath. “It’s not that. You’re... you’re a good man, Harry, and you have to stay that way. You can’t... mustn’t let yourself be dragged down by V-Voldemort,” she said earnestly. It was difficult for her to say Voldemort’s name now – that much was clear – but she kept at it and Harry was quietly proud.

“I won’t be like him, not ever,” he assured her.

Hermione pressed on. “There are so many great things you can accomplish, Harry – I know you can. You have a lot of influence, and that’s only going to increase now. Goodness, even the goblins –”

Harry's eyes snapped open. "Goblins... what about the goblins?"

Hermione was suddenly very excited. "Oh, yes! I can't believe that I... well, you see, I went to Gringotts to exchange some pounds for Galleons... honestly, I went because somehow I received a Gringotts key... oh! I didn't mention the key, either – that was passing strange, I can tell you – anyway, a Gringotts key turns up in my hand yesterday morning –"

"Goblins, money, a key... I'm struggling to keep up!" Harry laughed.

Hermione lowered her head and grinned. "Sorry – I was all over the place, wasn't I? Perhaps I should begin with the key?"

"Is that the beginning? You might want to start at the beginning," Harry said with a smirk.

"Prat," Hermione said; she smacked him on the shoulder, but she had a smile on her face. "I woke up yesterday morning and I was clutching a Gringotts key. It wasn't mine of course, as I don't have a vault. Mr. Weasley and Bill escorted me to Gringotts so that I could visit the moneychanger but I mentioned the key while I was there. They escorted me to the back rooms in a trice; at first, I thought that I was in trouble. I met with a goblin called Fliptrask – he mentioned that he was in charge of your trust –"

Harry nodded. "Fliptrask was the goblin who had me sign Sirius's will."

"Harry, the long and short of it is that the key was a copy of the key to your vault – a precise copy. They had no idea how it came to be, let alone how I came to have it," Hermione explained.

"You found this key yesterday morning, before you caught the Express," Harry confirmed.

Hermione worried her lip and then looked dead centre into his eyes. "Did you pay me a visit, Harry?" she asked suspiciously.



“No!” Harry insisted. “I don’t even have my vault key – Ted Tonks has it in safekeeping. I don’t know of any second key, either.” He thought for a moment, and asked nervously, “Um... when did you go to sleep that night?”

Hermione’s face tightened. “Mrs. Weasley received her howler that afternoon. I turned in rather early.”

Harry grinned. “I can imagine you didn’t want to come out of your room after that.”

“She was almost gracious about it, in the end. I hadn’t expected that,” Hermione said. Her brow furrowed and she asked, “Why did you want to know when I went to sleep?”

Harry’s cheeks flushed. He certainly didn’t want to bring up the disastrous dinner with her parents; for that matter, he didn’t want to bring up her parents at all. Hermione rolled her eyes at him and said, “You’re usually better than this at keeping secrets.”

His resolve stiffened, and he sought a way to reveal his growing suspicion without giving away too much. “Remember the book and the rose? I wonder if it was something like that?”

Hermione hesitated, but then shook her head. “They didn’t last for more than a few seconds. This key was solid metal, and it must have lasted for hours.”

“It was smaller,” Harry pointed out.

“Yes, but the key was far denser,” Hermione countered.

“It was just a thought,” Harry conceded.

Hermione let out a slow breath. “It’s as good a thought as any, I suppose. That book appearing in our front room violated a dozen basic rules of magic... but then again...” She reached out and patted him on the knee, which startled him. “If there’s one thing I can always count on with you, Harry, it’s that you’ll constantly force me to rethink the rules.”

Harry fidgeted. "Er... I'm sorry?"

"I can't figure why you would cause a key to appear in my hand," she went on, "or why my name is listed on your vault. Erm... that was rather a shock, by the way."

Harry couldn't bring himself to move; he had to remind himself to breathe. Hermione answered his unspoken question. "From that first telephone call until you came for dinner, strange things happened whenever you were upset. You were very upset on the telephone, Harry. It stands to reason that you did it; I don't think you set out to scare us silly."

"I... I don't know for certain, but... yeah, I probably did," Harry acknowledged.

Hermione rubbed at the runes on her hand. "You do have a knack for long-distance magic," she murmured.

Harry tried to change the subject. "So... about the goblins...?"

"Why did you send me a key?" Hermione blurted out. "I mean, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to say, but I'd like to know why, because it must have taken a very strong emotion and I worry about what's been happening to you and what else might happen to you and —" She seemed to realise that she was prattling on and quickly stopped herself.

Harry stared into the fire at the far end of the anteroom. He told her the truth, just not the whole truth. "I was... thinking about Sirius's money that night," he said quietly, "about how it's blood money and how I don't want it, and how I think it would be brilliant if you had it. It'd serve the old Blacks right. You'd know what to do with the money; you'd do something good, I'm sure of it — great, even."

A wash of different emotions played across Hermione's face, and Harry felt their echoes in his mind. He couldn't sort any of it out save a deep sadness. For a moment he thought of holding her, and wished he knew whether holding her was what he wanted to do or if it was

just a matter of reflecting her thoughts and feelings, or if it was something else, something darker. The more he circled through the possibilities, the more confused he became.

"I think you should keep the money, Harry," she said at long last. "It might be needed before all of this ends. After you kill V-Voldemort, then give it all away if that's what you want. You can see it put to good use; you don't need me to assure that."

"Maybe we can do it together?" Harry offered.

Hermione nodded hesitantly. "I'd like that."

Harry didn't remember having so many awkward pauses before, when the two of them would talk. "Now... about the goblins...?" he asked with mock impatience.

Her eyes suddenly widened. "The goblins - yes! You should contact this Fliptrask as soon as possible. He told me to pass along an invitation to their hunt!"

Harry immediately thought of the graphorn head that hung in Fliptrask's office. "Erm... he wants to invite me to a goblin hunt? That isn't done, is it?" he asked.

"There's very little documented about the goblin hunt, let alone any mentions of wizards being invited," Hermione said excitedly. "It has to be important, don't you think?"

Harry mulled that over. He suspected that it was mostly to do with the Potter Trust, but nodded in agreement. "I'll contact him, then," he said.

Hermione started as if to say something else, but her eye caught her watch. "I see I'm late for Potions," she said unhappily.

Harry sat back comfortably in his chair and tried not to smirk. "No worries. Dumbledore's teaching Potions, today and tomorrow at any rate."

“The Headmaster’s teaching? What happened... was Professor Snape, you know, called...?” Hermione’s expression went from confusion to concern and on toward doubt. “You’re smiling, Harry. What have you done?” she added suspiciously.

Harry raised his hands. “I didn’t do anything. Snape managed this on his own,” he said.

“O...kay...” Hermione’s brow furrowed. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

Harry allowed himself to smile broadly. “I imagine you’ll figure it out on your own,” he said. She reached for her book-filled knapsack and made her way to the door; she cast curious looks back at him several times, but he simply maintained his smile. For a moment he was certain that she stuck her tongue out at him as she passed into the Great Hall, but decided that it was merely a trick of the light.

\* \* \* \* \*

The door to the Defence classroom was ajar. Harry didn’t think that Detheridge would ambush him, but he figured that one should be cautious with any Defence professor hired by Dumbledore. Besides, I don’t know anything about these assistants – not even how many there are, he thought.

Detheridge was standing on the stairs that spiralled up to his office. There was an easel before him, upon which sat a large and rather brightly coloured canvas; he held a brush in one hand and a tray of some kind in the other.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Running ahead of schedule, I see?”

“Dumbledore’s day is a bit of a mess –” Harry began.

Detheridge snorted. “Yes, yes – Snape is, uh, indisposed... of course, I shouldn’t be one to talk.”

“I can return at three,” Harry offered.

"No reason for that," Detheridge said. "My assistants should be here any minute. I have to say that Albus has been nothing if not generous. I certainly never expected he'd grant me two fully qualified wizards, not to mention... ah! Here they are!" He looked past Harry's shoulder.

Harry turned to face the open door behind him, caught a flash of dark robes and promptly met a fist. He crashed into the nearest student desk before he knew what had hit him. The owner of the fist grabbed him by the lapels and dragged him to his feet.

"Wotcher, Harry," Tonks spat.

"What do you think you're doing?" a familiar voice rang out. Harry's glasses were askew; he couldn't make out anything save Tonks's crimson face. As he burst into action, it occurred to him that the voice belonged to Bill Weasley.

Harry brought his arms up and shoved Tonks backward as hard as he could; she stumbled into Bill. Harry pushed his glasses into place and barked, "Accio wands!" Two wands flew out of Tonks's robes, another two came from Bill, and a fifth wand struck Harry between the shoulder blades. He moved automatically into the stance that Dudley had taught him, and swung swiftly at Tonks. The first blow connected; the second was just off, as she moved quickly aside.

Tonks wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth. "You think you can take me on? Let's play, little boy," she sneered and raised her arms.

"Damn it, Tonks!" Bill snapped. He moved between Harry and Tonks, and she attempted to push him aside.

"He isn't stupid – he knows what he needs to say," Tonks snarled. She tried to burn a hole through Harry with her eyes. "I was too surprised to say what I thought that day, Harry. You know what I would have said, when you tried to lay all that guilt on me? I would have said that he came there to protect you. Sirius is dead because of you. Don't ever try to blame me for it again!"

Bill advanced on Tonks and grabbed her by the arms. "If I'd known this was to be an ambush, I'd never have come!" he shouted.

"Get out of my way, Bill," Tonks said.

"If she wants a fight, then we'll fight," Harry returned.

"This is ridiculous!" Bill snapped at Tonks. "You spent an entire day last week talking this through with your mum – we were over it for the better part of a day on it, besides – and here you are, nursing a grudge like... like... like some Slytherin school-girl –"

Tonks's head snapped forward into Bill's brow. Bill let go of her like she was on fire, and grabbed at his forehead. "Merlin's balls! What the bloody hell was that for?" he shouted.

"A Slytherin school-girl? A Slytherin school-girl?" Tonks spat.

Bill turned his head, winced, and turned it back again. "Let me understand this... he insults your family and gets a punch –"

"Two punches, including the last time" Harry growled, "and she knocked loose a tooth that time."

"... while I merely tell the truth, and you try to crack my skull?" Bill went on.

Tonks crossed her arms. "Calling me a Slytherin is a family insult," she said coldly.

The tips of Bill's ears turned a familiar shade of red. "Who's sixteen here, you or Harry? I'm having a devil of a time deciding!"

Detheridge still stood at the top of the stairs. His voice was calm, almost quiet. "Is this finished yet, or should I send out for coffee and doughnuts?"

Tonks stood very straight and put her hands behind her back. "P-professor Detheridge, I didn't see you there... uh... I understood that we were meeting with... er..."

Detheridge slowly descended; strangely, something about the way he moved reminded Harry of Crookshanks. "It seems I'm free today rather than tomorrow, Auror Tonks; I have a knack for mixing up my daily schedules. It's best that I was here, don't you agree?" he said.

"Professor, I can explain –" Harry began.

"She moves in tandem with her dominant hand," Detheridge said casually. "Next time, aim to the left with the second punch." He motioned toward the student desks and added, "Sit, please." Despite the even tone it was not a request, but an unmistakeable command. Bill and Tonks found seats as quickly as did Harry.

Bill shifted uncomfortably on the bench; he was too tall for it, and his knees rose nearly as high as the tabletops. "Er... Professor Detheridge –" he began.

"Next time, Mr. Weasley, protect your head." Detheridge's brief smile faded. "Mr. Potter, I don't want to know what you said to Auror Tonks that earned you a fist to the jaw. I'm guessing it warrants an apology?"

Harry looked away uncomfortably. "I'm... not proud of what I did, Professor."

"You meant to be cruel; you struck where you knew it would hurt," Bill scolded him. "I know Tonks was being stubborn –"

"I was responsible for protection," Tonks said through gritted teeth.

"Dumbledore made you responsible for that; I didn't ask for any of it," Harry snapped. "I shouldn't have said what I did, but I told you to leave my property and you wouldn't go!"

Tonks sighed. "I was there because I wanted to be there, you twit. Dumbledore asked, sure, but it was what I wanted to do. You see, for some odd reason I do care about you. Never considered that, did you?" She wrung her hands nervously.

Harry had certainly not considered that, and somehow it felt true. “Dumbledore’s always in charge. The Order’s all about Dumbledore –” he began to protest, but he froze when he realised what he’d said aloud.

“I am aware of the Order, Mr. Potter,” Detheridge said quietly.

“It’s not all about Dumbledore; it’s about ridding ourselves of Voldemort,” Bill insisted. “Dumbledore makes mistakes, of course; pulling everyone away was the most childish thing –”

Tonks interrupted, “I wanted to be there, Harry. I should have been there for Sirius but I wasn’t; of course he had to go and do something brave and stupid. I was supposed to protect Hermione and her parents, and I didn’t – I couldn’t...so I wanted to make up for it and be there for you. I wanted to do something right for once. We were getting on well enough, and then you just tried to toss me aside, and then you just had to say...” She trailed off; her eyes were dry and clear but her jaw quivered slightly.

Harry wished that the floor would split open and swallow him up, but it seemed unlikely. Instead he cleared his throat, closed his eyes and said, “You didn’t hurt Sirius, you didn’t kill him; I know that. I just wanted you to go and you wouldn’t listen. I am sorry for what I said, Tonks.”

“You didn’t kill him either,” Tonks said sadly, “Peter sodding Pettigrew did, fifteen years ago. Bellatrix, she just finished the deed. The rest of us... maybe we helped him along. Me, you, Dumbledore, Remus... it feels like it could have ended well if any of us had done just one thing differently – just one. But, no – everything turned to shite.”

“This is about your godfather, Harry?” Detheridge asked.

“Tonks is his cousin, as well,” Harry said.

Detheridge sighed. “No one your age should have to deal with these sorts of things.” He looked to Tonks and Bill. “No one your age should have to deal with this, either, but here we sit with a war just around the corner. It’s up to us to give the students of this school a fighting



chance to survive it.” Harry joined Bill and Tonks in a solemn nod, and Detheridge went on, “Good – we understand each other. Now... if there are going to be any more fistfights, this is the time for it.” He stood up. “Last opportunity, folks... going once... going twice...” Tonks stared resolutely at the floor.

Detheridge ambled to one of the cabinets that lined the side of the classroom. He withdrew a slender sword and casually tossed it toward Bill. Bill easily caught it by the hilt and gave it a practiced swish. “I know these well – practiced regularly with them,” Bill said. “They’ll be too light and a bit short for most of the older boys, but I can charm them.”

“Everyone should learn the basic elements of swordsmanship,” Detheridge said. “Flitwick raves about you, Mr. Weasley. Show me.” He raised a matching sword and immediately set after Bill. Detheridge moved as though he knew how to fight with a sword, but Bill disarmed him twice in less than two minutes.

Detheridge leaned against a student desk, panting. “You’re very... very... good. Do you compete? You’re easily... at the... elite level.”

“By the time I was able to enter myself in competitions, I already had an offer from Gringotts.” Bill still wore his easy smile, but Harry thought that it didn’t match the tone of his voice.

“You mean that was without regular practice?” Detheridge laughed. “Are you experienced with any other weapons?”

“A few,” Bill admitted. “Staff, mace, and a few Muggle things as well – one of them spits out tiny lead balls kept in a capsule –”

Detheridge’s eyes widened. “Uh... I think we’ll stay clear of shotguns.”

“ – a bullwhip, a switching blade –” Bill went on.

“Switchblade, you mean,” Detheridge corrected him.

“ – and a right nasty piece of business called a brass knuckle,” Bill finished.

“You know how to fight like an ordinary person, then,” Detheridge observed. “Good – that’ll be useful.”

“I learned how to box earlier this summer,” Harry offered. “My cousin’s a boxer; he’s won some big contests.”

Detheridge nodded. “Your stance was obvious. That may also be useful. Auror Tonks, do you have any experience with physical combat?”

“No more than we cover in training,” Tonks admitted. “I fall back on other abilities, Professor. I’m a Metamorphmagus.”

“Albus mentioned that,” Detheridge said. “You move more gracefully than I expected.”

Tonks snorted. “You haven’t been ‘round me long enough! Dance helped a fair bit, but I’m still a wreck after I alter my arms or legs.”

“You dance?” Detheridge asked.

“It’s part of Auror training, Professor,” Tonks said.

“You’re kidding! They teach you dancing?” Detheridge asked in disbelief.

“I don’t know what they do in America, but here in England we work in twos. Dancing teaches an Auror to be aware of her body and her movements, and the movements of her partner as well,” Tonks explained. “I found it quite useful. Dumbledore asked me to teach Harry, before... um... well...”

Detheridge picked at his lower lip, seemingly in thought. “Dancing... certainly wouldn’t have thought of that... you’d think I’d have remembered...” He looked up, almost as if he was surprised to see anyone else before him. “Do you believe this would be useful on a broader scale?”

"I hadn't thought about it," Tonks admitted.

Detheridge walked away from them, toward the stairs that led to his office. "I'd like the three of you to prepare a report detailing your recommendations for this year's curriculum. Be sure to note what belongs in the courses proper, and what should be left to the club. I expect to receive the report by noontime tomorrow. That's all I have." He took up his brush and his tray and stood before the half-painted canvas atop the stairs, as though no one else was present.

Bill looked to Harry and then to Tonks, shrugged, and moved into the corridor. Tonks was the last one out of the room, and she closed the door. "What in the name of all that's cursed..." she exclaimed. "Is he fishing for recommendations, or are we expected to plan the year for him?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Bill said. "We should assume that we're planning the year, don't you think? We'd best get to work on it... has Dumbledore given you rooms, Harry?"

"I took rooms in Hogsmeade," Harry said. "We can probably use the room just off the Great Hall, or the staff room if it's empty."

"Is that the one with the bloody gargoyles? I was walking with Mum earlier, and I swear one of them tried to lick me as we passed," Tonks said with a shudder; "The other room sounds smashing to me."

Harry led the way. After a few steps, Bill fell back several paces and Harry found himself walking beside Tonks.

"I'm sorry I knocked out your tooth," she said abruptly.

"You didn't knock it out," Harry grumbled. "It was just loose; Dobby fixed it."

"Dobby, eh...?" Tonks went silent again, until they neared the entrance to the Great Hall.

"How's Hermione faring?" she asked.

"I'm not really sure," Harry answered.

Tonks worried her lip. "Being with Hermione this summer was like having a sister, Harry; I miss that. I should go and see her – we had a bit of a row at the Leaky Cauldron – but... I didn't do my job. I was supposed to protect her. Maybe I should let well enough alone?"

"She doesn't think she belongs here anymore; she's lonely. She'd be happy if you called on her," Harry offered.

Tonks stopped walking. "Are we all right, Harry?" She seemed so expectant; Harry felt like he could crush her with the wrong words, and that was something he'd never imagined of Tonks.

He opened the massive door. "Sure, Tonks; we're all right."

\* \* \* \* \*

At a certain level, Harry had understood that Tonks would be knowledgeable – she had to be, of course. Her expertise was more specialised than he had expected but ran quite deep. Bill, on the other hand, seemed to know a bit about everything; he also had a sense of how to pass along what he knew. Bill had gone out of his way to compliment Harry's skills and ideas, going so far as to say that he could now appreciate why Harry had been so successful with the D.A. members of the year prior. He seemed genuine enough, but Harry couldn't escape the sense that Bill was flattering him a little.

Harry in fact felt rather like an idiot upon leaving the planning session, or hopelessly inexperienced at the very least. He quickly lost himself in thought, eyes fixed to the floor and mind grasping for readings from the Black library that likely weren't well remembered in the first place. He lurched into a slender mass of sky blue cloth and fell flat.

Dumbledore smiled down at him. "I believe the accepted maxim is to look down before looking up. Perhaps you would be better served by the inverse?" The Headmaster extended a hand; Harry mumbled an apology as he rose that was dismissed with a wave. "Nonsense,

Harry; your timing is impeccable. Come along, would you?" He motioned to the ascending stairs.

Harry followed without a word, still stung by his incompetence in the face of Bill and Tonks and now embarrassed for having tumbled into Dumbledore. He barely heard Dumbledore call out the name of some sugary confection or another and continued to trail behind. He looked up before looking down just as he reached the entrance to the Headmaster's office and instantly wished that he hadn't done so.

Mad-Eye Moody sat heavily opposite Dumbledore's great desk. Shacklebolt was speaking in quiet but determined tones to Mr. Weasley, just to one side of a bank of whirring silver objects that Harry had shattered in June. Remus Lupin stood closest to him, and it was clear to Harry that his erstwhile protector and teacher was just as uncomfortable as he. Dumbledore ushered them forward to newly conjured chairs before either Lupin or Harry could speak.

"Gentlemen, I regret the need for this additional unpleasantness," the Headmaster said gravely. "It is all too reminiscent of times past, is it not?"

Moody's eye picked up speed; he asked coldly, "Did you cast the Curse on him, Albus?" He was met with muttering from Lupin and Mr. Weasley; Shacklebolt crossed his arms and appeared rather smug.

"That was not something lightly entertained," Dumbledore said sternly. "In any case, it was not required; Severus did not engage in knowing betrayal. He has, however, exercised abominable judgment – on this point we doubtless agree."

"Judgment? You still give him credit for any sort of judgment?" Shacklebolt boomed.

"Once a traitor, always a traitor," Moody muttered.

"Albus has repeatedly said that Snape is not a traitor," Mr. Weasley interjected. "Merlin knows I don't care for the man, not at all; nonetheless..."

Lupin gave a slight sigh before he spoke. "You never choose your words casually, Albus. He has engaged in unknowing betrayal, then?"

The room was full of loathing, and Harry felt himself fill with it. Most was directed to Snape, of course, but he already knew how Lupin felt – he knew. It had hurt and he had lashed out. Now he was merely angry; it was uncomfortable to be in the same room with the man. "Better than knowing betrayal, Remus," he seethed.

Lupin sagged. "Go on, Harry. Do your worst."

Shacklebolt balled his fists. "You can't be serious... are you trying to play the victim? It certainly looks as though an oath no longer means a tinker's damn to you; perhaps you found a way to avoid taking one?" Lupin reddened but said nothing.

"You've declined a mission and you've missed shifts," Moody barked. "What's wrong, Remus – does that woman have her claws in you?" Mr. Weasley hissed and even Shacklebolt winced. Moody's expression went blank and his eye stopped moving entirely. "That's not what I meant, of course," he added quietly.

Mr. Weasley broke the cold silence. "Let's stick to the knitting, shall we? Snape didn't set out to betray us. I accept that he has broken his personal promises to you, Albus; whether those constituted an oath is something for Snape and yourself to consider. We need to come to agreement as to whether he has broken his oath to the Order."

"I've made my opinion clear," Shacklebolt glowered. Moody took in a breath as if to speak, but stopped himself.

Dumbledore steepled his hands before his face, lost in thought. No one spoke, though it seemed to Harry that all were tempted. "Harry, I'd like to hear your opinion on this matter," the Headmaster said at length.

Harry could feel the loathing again. He knew that it wasn't directed at him but it was confusing. The rush of other people's emotions and thoughts was harder to bear now that he knew what was happening. "Part of me wants to tear Snape apart," he blurted out angrily. He

glared at Dumbledore, then went on, "Part of me says you're to blame. I didn't want him to teach me, and I know he didn't want to do it; you forced both of us. I figure that he wanted to hurt me, to make me miserable; he's done that since the first day I came to Hogwarts. That doesn't mean I want to see him killed."

"Killed? No one was suggesting –" Shacklebolt began.

Harry cut him off. "If you turn him out, he's as good as dead. Isn't that right, Headmaster?"

"Most likely, yes," Dumbledore admitted.

"So he's above punishment, then?" Moody growled. "What do you want of us, Albus? Do you want to fit him with a dunce cap and sit him in the corner? We went over this when we approved the Betrayal's Curse –"

"He has been punished beyond even your imaginings, Alastor," Dumbledore said quietly. Harry thought about the horrible tasks that Dumbledore had mentioned in the dungeons – horrible enough to drive Snape to Forgetfulness Potions – and shuddered inside.

"And now we know that there was no betrayal," Mr. Weasley reminded. "It may be appropriate to remove Snape from the Order, but what would we do with him? We can't let him loose, of course."

"He wouldn't simply be killed; worse, he'd be taken in and tortured until he revealed every last thing he knows," Shacklebolt agreed. "I doubt he'd talk; the man does have a perverse sense of pride about him. Still, we can't take the chance."

"I think Harry should decide what's to be done," Lupin said.

Harry erupted. "Oh, now Harry should decide! I guess it's all right when you don't want a decision on your head, eh?"

Lupin stiffened. "This is different, and you know it. Don't be childish."

“Then don’t be two-faced,” Harry sneered. “Don’t tell me to decide about Snape when you won’t let me decide who I want to see. Don’t tell me to live my life and enjoy myself when you just want a sodding weapon.” His voice rose; part of him was vaguely aware that Shacklebolt was backing away, but he didn’t care. “Don’t tell me you owe my parents and then just walk away! Who’s the betrayer here? You couldn’t even look at me! You blamed me for all of them – for Sirius, for Cedric, for... for Dad and M-Mum...”

“No!” Lupin gasped. “I would never... I never said that – I didn’t! You were a baby, for Merlin’s sake!” He reached toward Harry. “How could you think – ?”

“Don’t touch me!” Harry roared.

Lupin kept coming. “Is this why you lit into me, Harry?” he asked.

Harry’s hands shook, and he began to sweat. He recognised the feeling now, and it frightened him. “Stop! I’ll hurt you!” he shouted.

“You will not,” Dumbledore said firmly as he moved briskly past Lupin and approached Harry.

“I can’t control it!” Harry insisted.

“You will learn, Harry,” Dumbledore calmly assured him. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and ground his teeth; he willed away the heat, but it seemed unwilling to obey.

“Is this Snape’s doing?” Shacklebolt demanded.

“I sense that it is unrelated to Legilimency,” Dumbledore observed. “I do wonder, however, what Severus may have unleashed.”

Lupin melted into a chair. “I didn’t say that,” he mumbled, “I couldn’t have said that... I couldn’t have... Harry, I...”

Harry wiped sweat from his brow; the room was cooling at last. “You didn’t say anything; you didn’t need to say anything,” he growled through gritted teeth.



"I couldn't even think that!" Lupin insisted.

"To the contrary, Remus," Dumbledore said, "that is precisely what you did." Harry gasped and Lupin let out a low moan. The rest went very quiet.

Dumbledore let one of his hands come to rest on Harry's shoulder. "Have you ever had a thought, Harry, that you had absolutely no intention of acting upon – a completely irrational thought, like pushing a friend from a high place – something that your conscious mind instantly rejected? I daresay that you have; this is a normal part of our internal dialogue, Harry. Do you understand what has happened?"

Harry slowly began to see where the Headmaster's thoughts were leading. "You're saying that I can't tell the difference," he said slowly.

"Occlumency does not just form a barrier; it also serves as a filter, if you will," Dumbledore explained. "Once you have achieved mastery, you will be able to feel patterns in emotions and thoughts, and discard extraneous information. This aspect of Occlumency is absolutely necessary in order for Legilimency to be useful – or safe, for that matter."

"So... just because I pick up on a feeling from someone doesn't mean anything... it might be a real feeling, or it might be rubbish?" Harry confirmed; his stomach began to ache.

Dumbledore sighed. "You were not progressing with Occlumency last year; Severus said as much, and I observed the same. It did not occur to me that I should test your Legilimency skills. Tom's attempted possession showed that you had developed the ability to resist. Severus explained this away as a consequence of his teaching approach, and I accepted his word. That was a grave mistake."

Lupin was ashen. "The idea that I thought... at any level... Harry, I swear to you that I don't hold you responsible for what happened to James and Lily," he said distantly. "I don't know what I can offer, beyond my deepest apology."

Harry heard him, but he was mired in the implications of what Dumbledore had just said. This was even worse than simply reflecting the feelings of others, he realised; there was no way of knowing what had been real and what had been meaningless. His anger could have been his own, or a reflection of someone else's feelings, or it could have come from silent suppressed rage all around him. He might have liked Hermione as something other than just a friend, or perhaps he had picked it up from her thoughts and feelings, or perhaps it was just the reflection of a fleeting thought on her part – perhaps she'd never actually felt anything at all? If that was the case, then he had merely felt an echo of nothing; it didn't seem that way to him, but he didn't know. Heather was even more complicated; she had been exercising the same uncontrolled Legilimency as he had, more or less. Maybe Shona was right, he thought, maybe it was just an out-of-control bit of magic? It didn't seem that way to him as he thought about her, but how was he supposed to know? "How am I supposed to trust anything?" he said aloud.

"I'm sorry," Lupin said sadly.

The anger came back. "You wanted to be there for me, and then you didn't. You were going to do whatever it took, right? As soon as something better came along, off you went! It's like there are two of you, Remus. How am I supposed to know which one is real?" Harry seethed. "Being sorry isn't good enough."

"What must I say, then?" Lupin asked.

"I don't care what you say, not anymore. What are you going to do?" Harry asked in return. "I want you to be the person who I thought you were. If that's not what you want, then I guess this is where it ends."

No one seemed to know what to say after that, including Harry. After a pause so lengthy that even Fawkes seemed to fidget, Dumbledore offered, "Perhaps you would prefer to meet in the morning with regard to your timetable, Harry?"

Harry nodded silently and walked briskly to the spiralling stairs. Lupin called after him, "Harry... I am sorry."

“More words,” Harry choked out, and he quickened his pace. He pushed through students massing toward the Great Hall, firmly enough to cause some grumbling. He fiddled for the Bonnie in the pockets of his robe even as he burst through the door that led to the courtyard. He took an angry step forward, and his other foot met uneven soil. His glasses crumpled when his face struck the ground.

He stood, even angrier, and cast an awkward repair charm. It wasn't until he had replaced his glasses that he noticed that he was surrounded by trees. He was on the path to Hogsmeade. I'll be switched – I popped through the wards, he realised. His first thought was that Hermione would be shocked. His second thought was that no one must know.

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September 4, 1996

Dumbledore had promised that Harry would learn Occlumency from someone other than himself, and he continued to insist that this would be the case. Apparently, Harry's instructor had not yet arrived; he presumed that it would be this Covelli woman – the one who had apparently cared for Hermione in August. In the meantime, the Headmaster had laden him with books and sent him off to read; he said that Occlumency would come first, with Potions to follow after Harry had achieved some level of mastery.

Harry had begun to assist Detheridge with the Defence classes for first through third years, and had come to the conclusion that the young students were more frightened of him than of their professor. It was awkward, but Detheridge had made the best of it. He liked the new Defence professor, even though part of him insisted that it was dangerous to do so. In Detheridge's case, Harry refused to listen – it was only echoes of Quirrell and Lockhart and the false Moody that made him suspicious, not anything that Detheridge had done or said.

Croaker, on the other hand, was surely dangerous. He had developed a tutorial in ancient runes for Harry, one that seemed as steep and treacherous as an icy cliffside. It was also very focused, and Harry couldn't help but decide that he was being led toward a

specific destination. If Croaker had selected the destination, then Harry didn't care to reach it. As a teacher, Croaker seemed harsh but fair – not a new Snape, at any rate.

Snape. Harry could scarcely think the name without anger. It was because of Snape that Harry could no longer walk down the corridors without being flooded with emotions and thoughts not his own. It was because of Snape that Harry didn't know where he stood with anyone – certainly not Dumbledore, nor Remus, nor Hermione, nor Heather. Being allowed to remain within the walls of Hogwarts was too good for the horrible git, Harry thought, but the alternative was most likely death – and that only after everything Snape knew had been forcibly extracted. Snape had been suspended from the Order but Harry wondered what that actually meant; it wasn't the same as being tossed out, apparently. Shacklebolt had told him that Mr. Weasley had absolutely insisted Snape lose his teaching privileges, but that would leave Snape rather exposed. Remus had devised a solution, however. Harry had balked at first; it was Shacklebolt that had talked him into agreement.

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Harry leaned hard against the ropes that bounded the side of the footbridge. He preferred to look to Hogsmeade in the distance than face Shacklebolt.

"You know Dumbledore's right on this, Harry," Shacklebolt went on. "Too many of Fudge's cronies have ties to the families of Death Eaters. For that matter, Snape has made his own enemies. Without his professorship, he's vulnerable to eviction. We've enough trouble with the Board of Governors..."

"Don't remind me," Harry fumed. The Board was frothing about Dumbledore's circumvention of their order; Harry was at the fore of the next Board meeting's agenda, he had learned.

"Remus's idea has merit," Shacklebolt said. "I know that you wish otherwise. Still, you should consider the advantages."

“Snape can’t sell out the Order. That’s the only advantage I see,” Harry said angrily. He settled a bit, and added, “That’s enough reason to do this, I suppose.”

Shacklebolt’s mouth twitched as though he was keeping a smile at bay. “Has it occurred to you that Snape would be employed by you? In fact, his life would be in your hands. The only thing keeping him alive would be a research sinecure provided by James Potter’s son... Sirius Black’s godson...” The smile broke through. “Wouldn’t that be rich?”

Harry sniggered first, then broke into a full-throated laugh. “Oh, that’s brilliant!” he managed. Snape would owe him; it was practically a wizard’s debt, in fact. Suddenly Remus’s plan looked much, much better.

After a while, Shacklebolt turned serious. “There are some in the Order who would happily bleed you dry, Harry; they know that you could single-handedly finance a war. Remus didn’t want to propose this for that reason, nor did I.”

“I can always say ‘no’,” Harry pointed out. “This time, I’ll say ‘yes’.”

“I thought it was important that you know this,” Shacklebolt said gruffly. “Remus was looking out for your best interests, truly.”

Harry gripped the ropes tightly. “Give it a rest, please?” he asked.

Shacklebolt nodded and strolled away. Harry watched the gaslights in Hogsmeade flicker to life, and then headed toward the castle to contact Ted Tonks.

- - - - -

Dumbledore had insisted that Snape should not be told that Harry had financed his safety, only that the Order had found a benefactor to pay for a research stipend. The appointment appeared to be under the aegis of the International Confederation of Wizards. Harry expected that Snape knew the source of the funds; the man was horrible, but Harry didn’t think that he was stupid. Harry hadn’t

disagreed with the Headmaster, but he hadn't bothered to agree either. He had decided to hold back the fact like a spare wand, and level it against Snape when the time was right. A voice in Harry's head warned him that he was treading onto Slytherin ground, but that only seemed fair where Snape was concerned.

After his second lesson with Croaker had concluded, Harry had headed for the library. Among the many surprises that had awaited him upon joining the staff, he had discovered that the teachers had a reading room of their own. Located just to one side of Madam Pince's station, a portrait concealed it as well as a Confundus charm tailored to leave the staff unaffected. He began reading the Occlumency materials and slogging away at Croaker's assignment. "You will write three feet that convince me you have mastered the third year materials, before I will devote another second to your instruction, Potter," Croaker had pronounced at the end of the first lesson.

He didn't set aside his work until his stomach began to grumble, and was very surprised to see that it was nearly nine o'clock. Madam Pince gave a start when Harry came through the portrait.

"Mr. Potter, have you been reading all this time?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "I lost track of the time, actually," he admitted.

"If I'd known, I would have notified you when it was time for the evening meal," Madam Pince said. Then she nearly beamed at him. "Goodness, is it possible that Headmaster Dumbledore will make a scholar of you yet? Perhaps Miss Granger has rubbed off on you?"

"I can study when I need to study," Harry insisted.

"True enough, Mr. Potter," Madam Pince admitted. "In future, I shall make more careful note of your study practices. If there is anything I can do for you, any assistance that I can provide... the Headmaster has made it clear that you are to have access to all materials, of course."

"Thank you, Madam Pince. I appreciate that," Harry said.

Madam Pince gave a formal nod. "On your way out, could you inform Miss Granger that I am preparing to close for the evening? She is at the rear."

"Her usual table?" Harry asked with a grin.

Madam Pince appeared suddenly unsettled. "Further back, I'm afraid," she said cryptically and returned to her work.

Harry strolled to the back of the library. The study tables were virtually empty; it was only the third day of classes, after all. As Madam Pince had said, Hermione's customary table was vacant. A familiar Ravenclaw sat at the table adjacent, poring over several open books. Anthony Goldstein glanced upward, and waved in recognition.

" 'Evening, Harry," he said. "Are you looking for Hermione?"

"Madam Pince asked if I would roust her – I suppose that goes for you," Harry replied. Anthony carefully closed one book after the other. He lowered a handful into his bag, and then gave his wand a complex wave; the remaining books flew smoothly into various places along the shelves.

"She's back there," Anthony said, gesturing toward the gate that marked the entrance to the Restricted Section. "She was there last evening, too. Harry... it's clear she's not well. Is it about what happened this summer?"

"It's not my place to say," Harry said evenly.

Anthony broke the awkward silence. "Will you be running the Association this term?"

"We're having an official Defence Club, actually," Harry told him. "Three of us will be running it – Ron Weasley's brother Bill and an Auror named Tonks are assisting Detheridge this year."

Anthony whistled. "An Auror, eh? That must mean we're taking the threat seriously; it's long past time for that." He lowered his voice and

added, "It's time for some offence, you know. Will you be addressing that?"

Harry was surprised. Anthony had seemed capable but quiet over the previous year. There was a glint in the Ravenclaw boy's eye and his posture was ready; the glint in his eye matched the feelings that he emanated. He'd also been the first to confront Malfoy on the train, Harry recalled.

"I'm not sure we'll be allowed," Harry admitted. "Besides, offence has to be planned." His throat tightened slightly. "I've learned the price of running into danger without a plan."

"Lovegood was truly in the thick of things?" Anthony asked him.

"Luna is very brave and very powerful – best that you don't lose sight of that," Harry returned.

Anthony grinned. "You scared most of the fifth-years out of their knickers, you know? Between that and Chang's little Educational Decree..." He rolled his eyes.

Harry snorted. "Comparing Cho to Umbridge? Bit harsh, isn't it?"

"Chang wouldn't have been my choice for Head," Anthony observed. "She's full of herself and she holds grudges..." He straightened up and quickly added, "No offence meant, Harry, you know... I mean, I know you and she were... um..."

"And now we're not," Harry said firmly.

Anthony quickly responded, "I know that; it's like there's a Sticking Charm on her and this Pucey fellow from the Snakes... what do you think of him, by the way? He's not one of Malfoy's crowd, is he?"

"I don't think he is," Harry answered. "He's always seemed as though he plays fair, you know – on the pitch at least."

"You've fallen in with Hermione at last, then?" Anthony asked casually.



Harry's breath hitched. "I'm sorry?"

"Um... you were at her house – it was in the Prophet when, you know – so I guess I figured... erm... everyone sort of figured that, well..." Anthony tugged at his collar as though it was too tight.

"She's my best friend," Harry said.

Anthony pressed. "Er... that's all?"

"That's quite a lot, I think. Why?" Harry said, trying not to be snappish.

"If that's true, I think most of my mates would be happy to hear it," Anthony admitted, "or at least they would have been.

Harry allowed himself to snap just a little. "Er... most of your mates would what?"

Anthony shook his head. "I know you had a lot to handle last year, but I would have thought you'd notice... um... the thing is, Hermione probably ranked second to Padma Patil as a desirable partner for Ravenclaw men. If they hadn't assumed she was spoken for and hadn't worried that you or Weasley might hex them into the next decade, I'd say that most of my housemates fifth year onward would have chatted her up last year." He sighed. "This year... I think everyone's confused by her. Chang won't confirm whether she gave up her prefectship or had it taken, which surely means that she gave it up. She even looks different..."

"Would you have asked her to Hogsmeade?" Harry blurted out.

Anthony smiled faintly. "I don't think so. I'd never have measured up – that seemed quite clear to me from the first." He added very seriously, "I'll say this much, Harry... I developed tremendous respect for her last year – for the both of you, in truth. When Weasley approached us on the Express, we didn't hesitate to help her. Come to think of it, Weasley's changed quite a lot as well. I swear he was taking notes in Charms... there's a first time for everything, I suppose."

“Look... I do appreciate that you’re all looking after her,” Harry offered.

“We are, I promise you,” Anthony assured him. “Do me a favour, then – give serious thought to what I said about offence. It’s time, Harry; it’s well past time...” The same glint returned to his eyes; something had happened over the summer, Harry was certain, and he wondered what it had been.

The wall sconces throughout the library flashed three times. “Time for you to clear off,” Harry said; “I’ll look in on Hermione.”

Anthony slung his bag over one shoulder. “Oh! I nearly forgot to thank you for my O in Defence. I won’t deceive myself – I’d never have managed it without what you and Hermione and Weasley did. I know I’m not alone in that, by the way. You saved my life, actually.” He gave a half wave and made for the doors.

“Glad we were of help,” Harry said quietly.

He didn’t care for the Restricted Section. Everything about it was darker than the rest of the library, from the flickering light that came from too few sconces to the deep grain of the wooden shelves to the thick tomes that sat upon them. There were only two worktables in the entire section, as there was surely no need for more. Hermione had fallen asleep atop an open book. There were at least two dozen other books stacked atop the table, along with an assortment of scrolls. She had written several feet of notes in small, tidy script; the parchment rolled off the far side of the table and nearly reached the floor. Harry’s eyes ran across the spines of the books, and his discomfort grew.

To one side sat Curses That Kill: Forgivable Combat Tactics; to the other Infamous Wizarding Assassinations lay open. Some of the titles meant nothing to Harry, but left him uneasy: there was The Energetics of Will and Arithmancy for Predictive Analysis of Thaumaturgical Events and a crumbling ancient tome called The Physical Properties of Magick. One of the scrolls lay open; it was littered with what Harry knew to be arithmancy formulae, although he couldn’t begin to comprehend them. One book looked as though it was bound using boil-covered skin, and Harry had no interest in

touching it to confirm his observation, nor of knowing what sort of animal had given up its skin; according to the raised reddish lettering it was The Grimoire of the Most Ancient House of Lipscomb.

He glanced across Hermione's notes despite himself; they too were littered with incomprehensible formulae and charts. From the words scribbled throughout it looked as if she was studying something related to the interaction of different types of spells – or at least he thought that might be the case. He assumed that it had something to do with her research for Dumbledore; it was too complex and seemed too dark for a mere N.E.W.T. level assignment.

As he moved forward to rouse Hermione, he heard Madam Pince's voice. "Welcome back to Hogwarts, Lucia," the librarian called out warmly.

The unfamiliar voice that responded was clear and lightly accented. "You have me at a disadvantage... good heavens! Irma Albright?"

"It's been Irma Pince for nigh on forty-five years," Madam Pince said.

"No! Not Calvin Pince?" the unfamiliar voice shot back.

"Indeed!" Madam Pince laughed. "Sweet Merlin, Lucia, I can't believe it's been fifty years. It was a great shock when the Headmaster informed us that you would be returning. So how does it feel, being back at Hogwarts?"

"It is... not somewhere I expected to see again." The unfamiliar voice was strained, then halted before adding, "I understand that Hermione Granger is here presently?"

"She is in the Restricted Section," Madam Pince said with clear disapproval. "Harry Potter went back to send her out; I'm preparing to close the doors."

"Mr. Potter, you say? The Restricted Section... I am unsurprised," the other voice sighed. "The library is organized as it was before, no?"

"Yes, the castle hasn't seen fit to reshape the library," Madam Pince said.

"I shall fetch her. It is a pleasure to see you, Irma; we shall become reacquainted over tea and cappuccino very soon, I hope," the unknown witch called out. Harry could hear light footsteps closing in. He stood his ground, but left Hermione to her sleep.

The woman who entered the Restricted Section was dressed unlike anyone Harry had ever seen inside Hogwarts. She wore a cream-coloured garment that fell somewhere between a robe and a cloak, over a tailored Muggle suit. He couldn't recall seeing a grown witch other than Rita Skeeter wearing high heeled shoes; this woman's heels were easily three inches high. She had dark hair finely streaked with grey that fell almost to her shoulders. Her eyes were warm but her expression was not. "Good evening," she said. "You are Mr. Harry Potter."

"I am," he returned. "You're Professor Covelli, aren't you?"

"Yes," Covelli said. She advanced toward the worktable rather than toward Harry, and turned her attention to the books upon it. "Has Hermione been working late into the evenings?"

"Another student told me that she was here until closing last evening, and she's here now," Harry said; "I haven't spoken with her for two days."

Covelli used the edge of Hermione's parchment to turn one of the books over. "Do you approve of her choice in readings, Mr. Potter?"

"Erm... I don't have the slightest idea what most of them are for, but... it all seems awfully dark," Harry offered.

"Yes, quite dark," Covelli said. "Were you about to wake her?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sure she'd rather see you than me," he offered.

"I doubt that," Covelli said in return. Harry stepped away from the table, making his intentions clear. Covelli nodded and added, "We shall see each other in the coming days. Good evening, Mr. Potter."

As he left, Harry stopped to look back into the Restricted Section. Professor Covelli leaned over Hermione, with one hand against the table and the other smoothing Hermione's hair. "Wake up, uccellina," Covelli said softly. "It is time to wake so that you can go to sleep again."

Hermione lifted her head and Covelli pulled back. "Wha... D-Doctor Covelli?"

"Hello, Hermione," Covelli said calmly.

Hermione burst out of her chair. "You're here! I'm so pleased you're here! I've been... I've been waiting..." She enveloped Covelli in a hug of the kind with which Harry was very familiar, and the new professor seemed surprised for a moment. Abruptly, Hermione's shoulders began to heave and she burst into sobbing. For her part, Covelli said nothing; she simply ran one of her hands slowly up and down Hermione's back. It looked like something that Harry imagined of a parent. He stood there and watched until he satisfied himself that Covelli was helping and not hurting; then he forced himself to stop watching and continued on his way.

\* \* \* \* \*

September 8, 1996

Harry rose to start another CD, but stopped upon checking his watch – it was nearly four o'clock. Arranging to see Heather had been a nightmare, and he wasn't about to miss the appointed time. His laptop computer was open atop the counter, still displaying her electronic mail message:

- - - - -

DATE: 08 September 1996 01:07:55 GMT

TO: 60791.

FROM: 80908.

RE: Sunday plans

I'll be at MacEvil's tent city for a good part of the day. We're putting last touches on a track, then there are photos at two [complete misery], and then the orchestra comes in at seven for a first run-through. I can fit in an hour or two at four. Meet by the northern stack on the beach; I'll call if I have to put you off.

HM

- - - - -

Her message was just as abrupt as each of the calls on the mobile had been. He'd spoken with her every night since his trip to Teller Brothers, but she always seemed to be headed somewhere or another – at all hours – and she always made it a point to tell him how busy she was. Guess she doesn't care whether I might need to put her off, Harry thought; maybe it's for the best if she doesn't have time for me. For his part, he had scheduled a meeting with Fliptrask at Gringotts for half past six. He figured that it wouldn't take more than an hour to know whether anything he might have felt for Heather was real. As for whether they were still nosing around each other solely because Remus forbade it, he figured he'd know that in mere minutes. Heather had been the one to bring up that possibility, very shortly after Harry had called her for the first time; Harry certainly couldn't reject the idea.

The day had turned out glorious after an inauspicious start. It's probably still gloomy in Hogsmeade, he guessed. Presumably the minders thought he was holed up in his rooms; he'd told Madam Rosmerta as much and then he'd popped from his empty bedroom to St. Ebb – by way of a steeple that had crossed his path and startled him back into normal space. He rubbed his sore elbow at the thought, as he slowly strolled down the switchback. There didn't seem to be any activity in the area of the tower, but he carried his Invisibility Cloak in a knapsack just in case it was needed.

Heather was walking Harry's beach. She was wearing a dress; it was like blue liquid that fell to a scoop in the front and a plunge in the back. She was barefoot and she charted her course in a straight line, not caring whether or not the surf might cross it. She looked furious, and Harry couldn't take his eyes off of her. She saw him and stopped and took a slow deep breath. He watched the rise and the fall and she smiled a little.

"Bad day?" he called out.

"Horrid!" she returned loudly over the crashing of the surf. "It's amazing I can still see, after all the bloody flashes!"

He was shocked by how different she looked as he drew closer. She was wearing quite a lot of makeup; it wasn't completely awful, but it seemed very out of place. Her hair was sprayed and teased and curled into something that he knew it wasn't. "You look... nice," he offered.

She let out a humourless laugh. "I look like a whore, Harry, but that's the general idea. Let's see...." Her fingers counted off as she went on, "I've gone from musical prodigy, to the girl with the pretty voice, to the bad-girl 'woman-child', and now to this. I hate this part of it; I've managed to push some of it off until now, but it's become a trading game with Vox. I get more creative control, and they get to market my... um... assets."

Harry didn't like what he was hearing; it didn't sound right to him. He changed the subject, hoping to take his mind off of her assets. "Other than having to take these, er, pictures... how are things coming along, then?" he asked.

Heather rolled her eyes, and began excitedly, "Well, everything started out disastrously on Monday – I mean, Kirley was really throwing me off – but then I had this idea, you see; instead of..." The anger seemed to bleed out of her as she went on. Harry slipped off his shoes and socks, and they walked on as she continued to talk. From time to time he added something or asked a short question, but mostly he just let her ramble. His eyes glanced to his watch, and it

dawned on him that he had gone thirty minutes without thinking about Voldemort or Hogwarts or Dumbledore or anything of real consequence. He still liked the sound of Heather's voice very much.

"...and he really has turned out to be a good fellow, after all..." Heather stopped abruptly. "Okay, that's it," she said. "I can really go on, once I've started." She scratched at her cheek.

"It's all right," Harry said. "Something the matter?"

"Just this makeup; they absolutely cake it on for the camera," Heather fumed. "It was bad enough listening to that cow lecture me on skin care —"

"I can remove it, if you like" Harry offered.

Heather stiffened. "I... I suppose you can do that, can't you?" she said. After a long hesitation, she nodded.

Harry took out his wand, and barely whispered the Delavo charm that Detheridge had used to clean away bloodstains. He didn't know why that charm had occurred to him; it just seemed the proper choice. The makeup slowly disappeared from Heather's face as he moved the tip of his wand from place to place. He was especially careful around her eyes, not wanting to hurt her in any way.

When he lowered his wand, Heather raised her hands to her face. "It's all gone — just like m-magic," she laughed nervously.

Harry could feel her fear. "This isn't going to work, is it?" he said; it was more of a statement than a question.

"Do you think that's all it was at the club?" she blurted out. "Was it just... you know... magic?"

Harry sighed. "Is that what Remus told you?"

"Shona said it." Heather's jaw tightened. "I'm not speaking with the wolfman. That's her business, not mine."



“Shona told me the same,” Harry said.

Heather’s eyes grew wide. “You talked to her? When did this happen?”

“It’s been a couple of weeks now,” Harry answered. “She wanted to talk to me about patching things up with Remus.”

“Did she say anything else?” Heather pressed.

“Well, she said she liked me –” Harry began.

“She said that? I’m... I’m surprised,” Heather cut in.

Harry frowned. “She also said that we’re bad for each other, because I’m dangerous and you’re...um...” He trailed off quickly.

Heather flushed. “Because I’m what? No, wait, I’ll make a guess at it... was it that I don’t know what I want, I don’t care about anyone but myself...?” Her voice rose powerfully. “... or was it that I’m a tart who won’t stay with a man for more than a week at a time? Am I on the mark?”

“Er... that’ll do...” Harry managed.

Heather let forth a withering stream of cursing that she had surely picked up the kitchen with Shona. He was feeling stirred up as well, so he interjected, “Oh, and she threatened my life, besides.”

Heather stopped as if the air had been let out of her. “I’m sorry?” she gasped.

“Uh-huh, she said that if I got you crossed up in my business, it was her I should fear,” Harry said. He couldn’t help a small grin – Shona had a loud bark, but he really didn’t fear her bite.

Heather slowly shook her head. “She’s always direct, isn’t she?” She turned and began to walk back down the beach. Her hand reached for his, and their fingers casually intertwined.

"That she is," Harry said. His mouth was very dry, which seemed odd in the presence of so much water.

"I suppose you want to know the truth of it," she said slowly. Before he could say anything, she went on, "I'm not one to let people in – I know that... um... you probably know it, too. That doesn't mean I don't care about anyone."

"I didn't say I agreed with her," Harry offered.

"I'm quick to make a choice, right?" Heather said. "Most of the time, I think I feel something for a fellow and then I spend a bit of time, and then I know that he's not right. He clubs too much or he's on the prowl or he's hiding something. I always knew eventually... it's hard to stick it out, when you always know." She looked at him for a moment, and her eyes seemed enormous. "It's even worse now – it happens all the time," she added, and then quickly looked away.

"I didn't mean for that – " Harry started.

"I know you didn't, but there it is," Heather snapped. "It's like the din in a crowd. I can almost hear it, and I can... you know... feel it. When someone's angry or sad, it's like... it's like being struck by a wave." She waved her hands at the sea. "Then another jumped-up twit comes along, and there's another wave, and I can't get out from underneath it, and... how can you stand it? Is it like that for you?"

"More or less; it's worse since Dumbledore explained what was happening, actually," Harry said. "He says this has been happening to me since the spring, and I just didn't know it. People would get angry and I'd get angry. I guess I wasn't around very many happy people, not until I came here. He says it's easier away from wizards – "

"It could be worse?" Heather shrieked. "It's like bloody voices in my head already! Worse? He was serious, then, when he said it could eventually... wasn't he? He... he meant it... Well, I'm never going back to that mad place - I don't care how bad this gets, I'm not going back there!"

“‘Mad place’? What place is that? Where did they take you?” Harry asked.

Heather erupted. “To that... that... castle! It was terrible – dark, drafty... there were ghosts – real ghosts, for God’s sake – and a big thing in the loch and creaking noises everywhere and... and... taking my meals with a three-foot-tall pointy-eared monster was the most normal thing in the whole bloody place!”

Harry sagged inside. “Heather... that was Hogwarts. That was where I’ve gone to school; it’s where I’m an apprentice now.”

“That was your school?” Heather howled. “No one ever said anything about that! I thought it was a prison!”

“It’s not a prison... it was my home, at least for a while,” Harry said dangerously. “You know what was a prison? The Dursleys’ house, the place I grew up and spent my summers until now – that was a prison!”

Heather backed away from him. “I’m sorry, all right? It just felt wrong! It was like... it was like having the whole world pressing in on me... and then the ghosts! I mean, that’s what Dumbledore said they were... I could see them sometimes, when the light was right... I could hear them, all right, wondering what somebody like me was doing there. The one with... you probably know, then – the one with the b-blood all over – it kept following me, closer and closer. Dumbledore, he told it to stop but it just kept on. The last three days, I didn’t leave my room!”

Harry tried to understand, but he felt stung – she hated Hogwarts, and he couldn’t imagine why the castle had been so horrible for her. The castle repelled Muggles, of course, but he didn’t think that it did the same to Squibs; Filch was there, after all. And what was the Bloody Baron doing? he wondered. It was true that Hogwarts no longer felt like his home, but he couldn’t imagine that a place he liked so much would be so repellent to anyone that he cared for.

“This really isn’t going to work,” he murmured.

“Then why did you come? Why do you think I’m here?” Heather demanded. She grabbed him roughly by the arm; he reacted out of instinct and reared out of her grasp.

“I don’t know!” Harry snapped. “I just wanted to know...”

“You feel it too, then,” Heather said.

Harry wiped the sweat from his free hand against his trousers. “Feel what?” he asked without meeting her eyes.

“Is it magic or is it real? Tell me,” she said.

“I... erm...” I wish I knew, he thought.

“Tell me!” she demanded. “I must be going mad with it! Everything – and I do mean everything – says that I should run like hell, Harry. I should run like Shona did, and never look back!”

Harry ran out of patience. “Then run! Be done with it! You could have said that on the telephone and saved us both the trouble!”

“I don’t want to run!” Heather shouted.

“Then tell me what in the bloody hell you want, because I can’t figure it out!” Harry roared.

“Oh, sod it! This! I want this!” Heather growled. Before Harry could react, she thrust one hand into his hair, wrapped the other arm around him and crushed her mouth against his. He was bewildered for a few moments and struggled to free himself, before he realised what was happening; then he gave in to it.

She tasted salty, he thought vaguely, though perhaps it was just the nearness of the sea. They were pressed together and he decided that this was amazing in and of itself. Her hands roamed through his hair and up and down his back and he found himself doing somewhat the same, which led to the recognition that she was wearing very little other than the blue dress. It was all very different than in the club –

that kiss had been magic, undeniably, where this one was overwhelmingly physical.

Heather broke off and took a step backward, heaving for air. She stared at him for a long moment, and he remembered just how bright her eyes were. "I... um... er..." She stopped stammering and fanned herself with her hands, and then started laughing.

"What?" Harry said, feeling a bit defensive.

"That's... why I couldn't... run away," Heather panted.

Harry slowly found himself grinning. "Oh..."

Heather smiled and gripped Harry's hands. "Um... wow..."

Harry wasn't sure what to do next. The whole thing had an air of madness to it. She was afraid of everything around him but didn't seem to be afraid of him, and that was completely upside down as far as he was concerned. He also knew that his knees had nearly buckled, and he felt a powerful urge for more of the same. He knew it was a mistake, and he kissed her anyway. Her eyes caught his for an instant as he advanced, and then she slammed them shut. Her hands were everywhere, and he became very aware of the feel of her bare back.

She broke off again, but held him close; they were both panting this time. "I'll never be able to kiss with my eyes open again, thanks to you," she whispered in his ear. She raised her left arm high, without letting go. "Blast! They'll be looking for me." She gave him a quick peck on the lips, and asked, "When can you see me again?"

Harry tried to gather his wits about him. It was definitely madness, all of it. "I... I don't know... um... I'll be at your concert on the 21st, you know... er... terribly busy, the both of us... uh... are you sure about this?"

She stepped back, smoothed her dress and chewed on her lower lip in a way that made him draw in a sharp breath. "I don't even know what 'this' is... I just know that I want to see you. Find a time, Harry.

Call me!" She walked away from him slowly; she kept turning to look at him, grinning. After thirty paces or so, she started walking backward. She fanned herself again and laughed – it was almost a giggle. He stood there and watched her walk and laugh and skip until she disappeared beyond the northern stack. It was then that he breathed again.

"What was that?" he murmured to himself, and sank to the sand. He watched the surf roll in and let his breathing fall into time and remembered the feel of Heather's dress and the taste of her lips. It was a mistake, he was sure of it.

He heard the sound of footsteps. Has she come back? he wondered excitedly as he turned.

"Hallo, Harry!" Mr. Weasley said warmly. He was clad in light coloured Bermudas and a garish jumper that upon closer inspection bore the Weasley Wizard Wheezes mark, and he held a butterbeer in each hand. Harry tried to speak but only managed a squeak and a burble as his stomach fell to his shoes.

Mr. Weasley handed him one of the butterbeers and took a seat on the sand. "It's a beautiful place, Harry. Molly and I can't thank you enough, you know."

"Uh-huh... beautiful... just cracking..." Harry managed.

"Harry..." Mr. Weasley began.

Harry struggled for words. "How long... erm... how long have you...?"

"I didn't expect to see your hand on the clock move to 'Home' this morning," Mr. Weasley said. "Then it jumped to 'In Transit' for the longest time, and then back to 'Home'. Yes, I was quite surprised."

Harry cursed himself inside. The clock... shite! He looked around nervously; there was no sign of Mrs. Weasley. "Where is...?"

"One of the advantages of being head of the house is a certain measure of control over the family clock," Mr. Weasley said off-

handedly. "You're at Hogwarts presently. Molly is fussing with the gardens, and I'm out for a stroll."

"Oh," Harry said. He stared determinedly at the advancing surf.

"This is your beach, Harry; it's your home. We're boarders, and it's not our business whether and when you come and go," Mr. Weasley said. When Harry began to fidget, he smiled and added, "It's not Molly's business, either. You've become like a son to us but truth be told, you're not our son." He paused and seemed to take in the sand and the surf for a time, and then added quietly, "You're not a child anymore; sometimes I wonder if you ever were?" He sipped at his butterbeer, and went on, "I assume that Albus and the others think you're in Hogsmeade?" When Harry said nothing, he went on, "I'm impressed that you made your way past Moody and his crew. It's not the safest thing you could have done, however."

Harry waited for the criticism to begin, but it didn't come; Mr. Weasley simply sipped on his butterbeer and sat there companionably. "I'm never alone," Harry said at last. "Someone's always watching."

"I imagine that's frustrating," Mr. Weasley admitted. "In fact, I suspect it would have driven me half-mad at your age."

Harry waited again. It's for your own good... he was certain that the words would come, but they never did. "I thought we were alone," he blurted out.

"I had no intention of intruding," Mr. Weasley said.

"I suppose you're going to tell Remus," Harry fumed.

Mr. Weasley set his butterbeer down, stood, and brushed the sand from his Bermudas. "No," he said.

Harry's brow beetled. "No?"

Mr. Weasley scooped up his bottle. "Fine afternoon for a walk, don't you think?" he said. Harry stood and followed.

Both were silent until they reached the northern stack. From nowhere, Mr. Weasley said, "She's a lovely girl, Harry."

"Yes... no doubt about that," Harry said.

"Do you honestly want to introduce something this complicated into your life?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted after a long pause.

"That's a fair answer," Mr. Weasley said. "Best you figure that out before proceeding too far, eh?"

Harry nodded, and said, "Fine." When does the other shoe drop? he wondered; When is he going to light into me?

"No matter what you decide...I want you to be sensible, Harry," Mr. Weasley said slowly. "You, uh, know how to be sensible in these matters... right?"

Harry flushed instantly. "Erm... by 'sensible', do you mean...?"

"I don't think I'm being unreasonable," Mr. Weasley returned. "She's lovely and she obviously fancies you, and you were showing rather a lot of interest... ahem... in any event... I'd rather you come to me about this sort of thing than fail to be sensible."

"Mr. Weasley!" Harry groaned

Mr. Weasley held his hands up. "All right, then – I'm finished. Let me know if I need to disable your hand on the family clock, would you? Be sure that you stop by the tower some time, as well. I know Molly would love to see you." He took Harry's empty bottle with him and walked away.

Harry was reeling; he didn't even manage to call after Mr. Weasley. He walked up and down the beach, and then began to run. The running would clear his head, he hoped, or lead to some kind of new understanding – some sort of realisation, some answer that he could



embrace. He was willing to settle for making sense of the afternoon. He accomplished none of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

September 9, 1996

Harry now loathed entering the Great Hall; after a week, he still caught a hundred stares each time that he passed through the doors. It wasn't as though he was especially noticeable, he figured, wrapped in a plain student's cloak and dressed in greys and blacks. He approached the Gryffindor table, in hopes of entering and leaving quickly.

Ron was sitting rather close to Lavender Brown, all the while trying to carry on a conversation with Katie Bell – Quidditch, surely – and at the same time to down half the table's repast on his own. He had a mad grin on his face; one arm waved wildly as he talked while the other skilfully manoeuvred scones and bangers and whatever else it could locate. Ginny was almost as animated, and Harry was surprised to see Seamus Finnigan leaning in on the conversation as well. Seamus was apparently using food to demonstrate a play, which looked to be messy business. A bit of marmalade flew onto Hermione's open book and she shot a death glare at Seamus and Ron. The glare was replaced by a smile as Harry came into view, and it occurred to him that he missed seeing Hermione and Ron in the mornings.

"Quiet down! The enemy's approaching!" Ginny said with a smirk.

Ron let out a barking laugh. "Oi, Harry! Hope you have the proper password – otherwise these Gryffindor girls will eat you alive!"

Harry grinned. "A bit full of yourself, Ron?"

Seamus gave a mock-bow. "That's a proper password, eh?" he said, and slid to one side. Harry declined a seat, and forced his eyes to stay on his old housemates rather than risk a glance at the staff table.

"So, is Dumbledore working you seven days a week?" Ron asked.

"We don't have a fixed timetable, not yet at least," Harry said. "I suppose it'll be five or six days a week; even Dumbledore likes his free time, right?"

"I see," Ron said off-handedly. "Guess I figured you'd drop in yesterday... you know, maybe help me organise for the Quidditch tryouts? It was a brilliant afternoon for flying, besides."

"There was a meeting to attend," Harry said.

Hermione looked up from her book and he gave her a knowing look. "With Fliptrask?" she asked.

Harry nodded and fished an envelope from within his robes. "He sent this along for you."

Lavender's brow beetled. "Fliptrask the goblin sent something for you? No offence intended, Hermione, but... I can see why Harry would be of interest, of course..."

"They're interested in my performance on the OWLs for some reason," Hermione said off-handedly; Harry knew that she was seething underneath.

"Why is it that you know Fliptrask?" Harry asked Lavender.

"Well, I wouldn't say that I know him, not exactly," Lavender bubbled. "Usually his associates come to the manor, but he's visited Dad at least once that I remember. He's responsible for the Blake family holdings, you see."

"Um... Blake family? Wouldn't it be the Brown family?" Harry said.

Lavender snorted at him. "Come on, Harry, you're head of the Black family now and your name isn't Black. Neville's heir to... oi, Neville! Where'd your estate come from, anyway? Richards, is it?"

Neville, who sat several places down the table. "Originally Castor on the Longbottom side," he said, then added, "and I'm Inheritor of the

House of Collier, through Gran's grandmother – no boys for two generations – not to mention the House of Croaker.”

“Thought I recognised the seal on that envelope,” Ron said.

“Do you know what it is?” Hermione asked Harry.

“An invitation, I expect.” Harry answered.

“What? I’m invited, as well?” Hermione gasped.

Ron put down his fork. “Invited to what? Gringotts invited you to something?”

Harry began, “Hermione’s invited on her own and I’m to bring a friend as well...” He smiled at Ron. “Think you can keep from being a right plonker for a few hours next Sunday?”

“Very nice, Harry,” Ron pouted. “I’ll have you know that I have this sidekick business pat, thank you very much!” Lavender laughed and clung to Ron’s arm.

“That’s a ‘yes’, then? Dumbledore wants to see Hermione and me at half past eleven; if you’re in, then you’ll need to be there as well,” Harry said.

“Of course I’m in,” Ron said; then he tightened up, and asked hesitantly, “Er... do you think I have the right sort of clothes, or whatever else – ?”

“You’ll be fine; I wouldn’t worry over it,” Harry assured him. “Half past eleven, then.”

Hermione tucked away the envelope and slung her rucksack over a shoulder. “I’m off to Ancient Runes,” she said flatly.

“I’ll walk with you,” Harry offered. He gave Ron a half-wave and moved quickly to catch up.

As soon as they exited the Great Hall, Hermione groaned loudly. "How can he tolerate that... that... cow?"

Harry took a half step back in confusion. "Who... what, you mean Lavender? I could tell you were out of sorts at the table, but –"

"It's like she's cast a permanent Sticking Charm, for goodness' sake!" Hermione grimaced.

Harry offered, "Maybe that's what he wants... maybe he wasn't leading her on, at the party – ?"

Hermione ploughed on. "You should see them in the Common Room; it's disgusting!" She reached up as though she was twirling long hair at the ends, assumed a perfectly vapid expression, and went on in a screechy high-pitch, "Oh, Ron, you're so funny! Tell me about all of your adventures with Harry and... oh, you know... what's her name..." Her voice fell to its usual tone, and she added scathingly, "Apparently five years in the same dormitory hasn't familiarised her with my name. She's cast too many beauty charms on herself, if you ask me... stupid bloody bint..."

"Hermione!" Harry snapped.

"He can do better than her, much better," Hermione insisted. "The only reason she's draped all over him is because she's noticed that other girls are interested. I should revise my description – she's not a cow; she's a leech."

"She can't be that awful – I think I'd have noticed," Harry insisted.

"You haven't had to live with her," Hermione grumbled.

"True, but I don't recall you being quite so furious with her before," Harry pointed out. The rest slipped out before he thought it through. "Besides, I thought you turned Ron down. Why are you making such a fuss?"

Hermione glared at him. "Because she'll go from crushing on him to nasty gossiping in the blink of an eye," she snarled. "He can do better

than her – it's practically staring him right in his thick face." She glanced at her watch and added coldly, "Professor Croaker's not kind to latecomers. I'll see you at half past eleven, I suppose – oh, and thank you so much for bothering to tell me about the meeting." With that, she stomped off without so much as a goodbye or even a glance his way.

Harry proceeded to drift through his Defence tutorial. Detheridge told him that the theme for the day was to take advantage of an opponent's obvious weaknesses. Harry held his tongue and managed to drop a steel ball atop Detheridge's head. Detheridge wasn't as forgiving as Shackbolt. After a brief stop with Madam Pomfrey, Harry made his way to Dumbledore's chambers.

Ron arrived shortly before half past eleven. Harry contemplated bringing up Hermione's growing dislike of Lavender, but settled on glancing at his watch every few seconds instead. After five minutes, he grumbled, "Where do you suppose she is?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "The library, of course. Send her an envelope, and she'll go off and study the sort of parchment it's made from."

"I guess she's on her own," Harry said. "Cadbury Cremes." The single gargoyle slid aside to reveal the stairs that led to Dumbledore's study. Just as they mounted the stairs and the gargoyle began to move behind them, Harry heard a squeak and then the bustle of a sack full of books. Hermione stopped just inside the stairwell to catch her breath. As soon as she did so, her hands flew to her hips. "Thought you'd just leave me standing there, did you?" she snapped. "Well... you're not the only one who knows the password, Harry."

"What did you do to her?" Ron whispered to Harry. Harry suppressed the impulse to wrap his hands around Ron's neck; he merely shrugged and continued to climb the winding stairs.

Dumbledore looked up from papers on his desk as they entered. "Ah, Harry... and Mr. Weasley? This is an unexpected pleasure... and where is Miss Granger?"

"I apologise for being late," Hermione said from behind them. "Professor Croaker refused to allow me to leave prior to half past eleven."

"Is that so? I shall have to speak to Algernon... he is orderly by nature; perhaps he expected a written request of me?" Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. "He does seem to demonstrate a certain disdain for you, however, and I am at a loss as to why that may be."

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said flatly. "You needed to see us, Headmaster?"

"Yes, be seated please." Dumbledore conjured three chairs with a tiny wave of his hand.

Ron became very still. "W-where is your wand, P-Professor?"

"My wand? Oh, yes... my wand... I am certain that I left it here somewhere..." Dumbledore began to pick through the papers before him. "It is rather inconvenient to always need one's wand at the ready, is it not?"

"Honestly, Ron! You've seen the Headmaster perform wandless magic before; you simply weren't paying attention," Hermione chided.

Dumbledore produced his wand from beneath a book. "It is not a skill that I take pains to advertise. I should not be surprised that you have remained undiverted, of course."

Hermione pulled out her envelope. "It seems that I've been invited to the hunt along with Harry."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, which immediately set Harry on edge. "Yes, it appears that the goblin community has taken an interest in you, Miss Granger. Let me pre-empt you by noting that this interest is in part due to your association with Harry, but only in part. To say that your performance on the OWL examinations was noteworthy is a profound understatement. Gringotts would consider it rather a coup to secure your services when you go out into the world."

Ron's face paled. "Hunt? Did you say 'hunt'? This is about a goblin hunt?"

"That's right," Harry said. "I've been asked to bring a friend – so here you are."

"A goblin hunt? Do you have any idea what goblins hunt?" Ron groaned.

"No," Harry answered. "Do you?"

Ron fidgeted considerably before he returned, "Er... not exactly, but that's not the point! Do you actually want to go hunting for some sort of monster and kill it with a sword?"

Dumbledore broke into a crooked smile. "I believe Harry has already accomplished that feat," he pointed out.

"Look, mate, you don't have to go," Harry offered.

Ron shook his head. "Oh, no, I'm going! Someone has to look after the two of you, after all!"

"Headmaster, you're not going to attempt to persuade Harry that he should take you or a member of the Order?" Hermione asked; she sounded rather suspicious, Harry thought.

"I have already made my attempt at persuasion, Miss Granger. Harry rightly pointed out that the goblins requested a friend accompany him. Since you were separately invited, Harry immediately brought up young Mr. Weasley here," Dumbledore said. "As much as I might prefer that Harry take along Mr. Weasley's brother William, I shall accede to his wishes."

Hermione stood, which surprised Harry. "If that is all, Headmaster...?"

Dumbledore waved her back into her seat. "I have set a time for the three of you to meet with Professor Covelli, for a review of what is known about the goblin hunt and contemporary goblin culture.

Regrettably that comes to little. You will be witnessing something very rarely observed by wizards; I am somewhat envious. On Sunday, Gringotts has arranged for you to be collected from here. I have informed Mr. Fliptrask of my preference that you be returned to Hogsmeade no later than nine in the evening. However, this event will transpire in the manner that the goblins see fit. If the hour grows sufficiently late, you will be excused from your Monday class meetings and other commitments. Do you have any questions of me?"

"Which member of faculty will accompany us?" Hermione asked.

"Mr. Potter will accompany you," Dumbledore said. "Three wizards have been invited and only three shall attend. It is possible that Professor Flitwick will be in attendance; he is occasionally invited to goblin ceremonies. At any rate, I will not risk provocation - not in a matter as unique as this. I cannot impress upon you sufficiently the gravity of this invitation. The three of you will be representing the wizarding community of the United Kingdom at an event that is believed to lie at the very heart of goblin culture."

"We won't let you down, Professor Dumbledore," Ron insisted; Harry could sense raging doubts, and he fought back a grin.

Dumbledore smiled broadly. "I should hope not, Mr. Weasley! You see, I have no intention of sharing this bit of news with Minister Fudge until after the fact, and I should very much prefer it if there is nothing of a disastrous nature to report. As it stands, Cornelius will expire of apoplexy should he find out that the goblins expressly forbade his attendance."

"We're to keep this quiet, then," Harry confirmed.

"That really would be for the best," Dumbledore agreed.

Ron began to ask, "So I shouldn't tell...?"

"No, you shouldn't!" Hermione snapped. She turned to Dumbledore. "May I be excused now, Professor?"



"If you wish, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said slowly. "Something between the three of you appears to require resolution; I do suggest that it be resolved prior to Sunday." Hermione nodded curtly and walked quickly to the stairs.

Ron threw up his hands. "What did I do to her?" he asked Harry.

Harry glared over the top of his glasses at Ron. "You can't be that thick; please tell me that you're not," he said coldly; without waiting for a response, he headed off after Hermione. Behind him, Dumbledore advised Ron, "I recommend that you pursue your friends with all haste... and with alacrity if you can summon it, Mr. Weasley."

Ron caught Harry before they reached the last stair. "Fine, then," he snapped, "consider me thick. I swear, every time that Lavender's name comes up, she... oh."

"And the torch is lit at last," Harry grumbled.

"Don't get shirty with me!" Ron protested.

Hermione was standing in the corridor just beyond the gargoyle. Her expression lightened for an instant as she saw Harry, but turned positively icy as Ron followed him into view. She headed off as quickly as Harry thought possible without running. Harry quickened his pace to keep up, and Ron loped alongside.

"Hermione! Hermione, wait!" Ron called out.

"I've had enough, Ron," Hermione snapped back without slowing.

Ron used his long legs to their advantage; in a score of steps, he overtook her. "I'm the one who gets accused of being a stubborn mule but you take the prize!" he growled. "You make up your mind about things, and that's the end of it – no questions, no chance to tell you what I think, nothing!"

"I thought you were finally growing up..." Hermione began.

Harry caught up and firmly planted himself between his two friends. His voice was low and as dangerous as he could make it. "This is the one thing I haven't missed a bit: watching the two of you go at it like cat and dog," he said. "We're not doing this in a corridor. The Common Room or the other place – choose one."

"The other place, then," Hermione said fiercely.

"Fine – I'd rather that the midgets weren't hanging about," Ron agreed.

This time it was Harry who scrambled forward; he forced Hermione and Ron to keep up with him. By the time they followed him up five flights to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy both were a bit bedraggled, which suited Harry fine.

"Cripes, Harry, the castle's not under attack!" Ron complained as Harry paced back and forth and ignored him. The door to the Room of Requirement appeared, and Harry flung it open.

Hermione peered in. "What is this place?" she asked.

Ron laughed uneasily. "Not what I would have expected, mate," he said. "I was ready for, you know, a dungeon or something."

Harry passed through the door and into a fair duplicate of the bothy. "I was thinking of a place where I'd want to be, where I'd want my two best friends to be," he said quietly. "I guess this is it."

"This is Harry's place," Ron explained to Hermione.

Hermione looked around appraisingly. The door closed after they all entered; she turned and looked out the front windows to the cliff's edge and the sea beyond. "What sort of place? This isn't your rooms in Hogsmeade."

"It's where I was living in August," Harry said.

She wandered past the shelves laden with record albums. "These are all rather old; they're along the lines of what my Mum and Dad would listen to... did they come from Sirius?"

Harry nodded. "The CDs are mine."

Ron flopped down on the settee and put his feet on the small table before it. Hermione started to scold him, but stopped herself.

"It has to stop," Harry said. "There's too much to be going on about, without the two of you fighting."

"Now, look here," Ron started. "Last year, you were –"

Harry felt his hands begin to shake; he squeezed them tight. "Last year," he cut in, "I was a horse's arse, you were a foul braggart, and Hermione was a hovering know-it-all – even if she was right most of the time. If I'd had the good sense to listen, a lot of things might be different. That was last year. It's time to talk about this year, Ron. None of us are the same now; nothing's the same anymore, can't you see that?"

"I think I'd rather do last year over," Ron grumbled.

"We're not children anymore," Harry said. "If I had any doubts about that, Dumbledore killed them in June."

Hermione had returned to the front windows and leant against the sill. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things," she said quietly.

Ron bit his lip for a moment, and then blurted out, "I don't think you've become a man, exactly."

"It's a quotation, for goodness' sake," Hermione groaned. She slowly moved to one of the armchairs, let herself sink into it, and looked pointedly at Ron. "I've been half the problem, Ron; I know that. It's just that you... you... you infuriate me sometimes!" Ron sat up sharply, but said nothing. Hermione went on, "You could have done

so much better; you could have been so much better! Instead, you just slid through life. With Harry, I've always been able to help somehow. With you... honestly, you wanted me to do your work – and you didn't need that! You're not stupid, Ron! You could do so much better than Lavender Brown." Harry could tell that it took a lot for Hermione to keep from spitting Lavender's name. She was trying, and he hoped that Ron could respond in kind.

"You need to stop treating Lavender like this, if you really want to be my friend," Ron warned her. "It has to stop. She hasn't asked me to tell you off or stop talking to you. One of these days she will, if you keep it up. She's not stupid either!"

"She doesn't love you, Ron," Hermione said.

Ron laughed. "I don't love her, either! She's nice and funny and she makes me feel good, and she doesn't expect anything that she isn't going to get from me. I like her to pieces, right?"

"Ron... you can do better than that," Hermione sighed. "It's right there in front of you."

"No, I can't!" Ron insisted. "Harry, help me out here?"

"Harry, will you explain to him what he's missing?" Hermione pleaded.

"Me? You want... you want me to explain... are you joking?" Harry spluttered. "I've been out with two girls; had... what... three kisses? Four? I think someone has to explain it to me!"

"See?" Ron exclaimed.

Harry rounded on Ron. "And you! If this is about what those ruddy brains showed you..."

Ron's eyes widened. "I thought you believed me!"

"I believe you saw what you say that you saw," Harry returned. "Are you really going to live your life based on it?"

“Oh, don’t even...” Ron fumed. “Everything you’ve done since the end of last year has been about that stupid prophecy –”

“Not everything,” Harry said. “When I was in St. Ebb –”

“You were doing exactly what I’m doing,” Ron finished for him. “Don’t tell me you had any kind of big plans? You thought she was a Muggle, right? You know it wasn’t anything more than a bit of summer fun.”

“Well, she’s not a Muggle, is she?” Harry snapped.

“Fair enough, but...” Ron stopped and his eyes widened. “You’re not still... oh, you are!” He laughed loudly. “Forget about the goblin hunt, mate – Lupin’s going to hunt you down!”

“You’re still seeing Professor Lupin’s daughter?” Hermione asked.

Harry’s jaw tightened. “No, I’m not.” His eyes fixed on Hermione as he added, “And how would you know about that, anyway?”

Hermione cast her eyes downward. “You weren’t alone there, you know? Ginny was around...”

“Ginny was just saying this morning how she’s hardly seen you, that you’re off to the library even more than usual,” Ron said.

“It was probably Tonks – she talks too much,” Harry concluded. “Go on, then: let me have it for not telling you everything about the summer.”

Hermione was obviously stung. “You know that I haven’t told you everything, either. I meant what I said, Harry; I meant what I wrote to you. Tell me what you want to tell me, and I have to trust that it’ll be enough.”

“You disapprove,” Harry said.

“Does it matter?” Hermione asked.

“Of course it does,” Harry assured her.

"I honestly don't know enough to say," Hermione said. Harry thought that she was telling the truth, but it was obvious that she was distressed – he could see it in the set of her eyes and the tiny pout of her lower lip.

"Well, I do," Ron said, "and I think it's a mistake. Nothing good will come from this."

"Basing this on your date, are you?" Harry growled.

Ron sighed. "I thought you were tired of fighting. So why mess about with this? You're going to lie to everybody and be cut off from Lupin forever for Heather? Hope she's worth it, mate."

"We're not dating," Harry said.

Ron threw up his hands. "It's not my business."

"I just want you to be happy," Hermione said. She added quickly to Ron, "I don't want to fight with you, I swear. I want you to be happy as well. If Lavender makes you happy, then... er... then I'm happy for you. Everybody's happy, see?" She stood abruptly. "I have to go; I've already been late for Defence twice, and I don't want to antagonise Professor Detheridge."

"Are... are you sure everybody's happy?" Harry asked.

Hermione stopped at the door and put on a smile that seemed forced. She glanced around the room once more. "I can see why you like this place – it feels right, somehow. Be seeing you," she said as she slipped out into the corridor.

Ron stood next. "It does feel right, doesn't it? I... uh... don't suppose you could find some time to play a bit of chess? It's hard to find people willing to let me beat them senseless."

Harry shook his head but grinned. "I suppose it's not right for me to leave other Gryffindors to that fate. You want to play here sometime?"

Ron nodded. "I figure you don't want to hang about the Common Room anymore. I've been staying clear of it myself except to meet up with Lavender."

"Are you happy, Ron?" Harry asked abruptly.

Ron shrugged. "I like being with Lavender. Maybe I'll like being with somebody else next month – I don't know. I'm happy enough." His brow furrowed a bit. "Who do you suppose Hermione was going on about? Right there in front of me, she says."

"Do you, um, think maybe she means herself?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Not a chance," Ron said. "Look, she was my chance to do better – I wouldn't ever tell her that because she'd get in a huff about it. You know what? It wouldn't have been fair, anyway. You heard her – she wants love straight out of the gates."

"That's awfully grown up coming from you, mate," Harry said.

"What'd she say... time to put away childish things, or something?" Ron nodded. "I reckon she's right about that. Like you said, she's right most of the time."

Harry followed Ron out of the room, and the door disappeared. "She just seems so unhappy; she completely avoided answering my question about that," Harry sighed. "I wish I knew how to cheer her up. I mean, she has every right to be in a bad way, with everything that's happened. I just don't like to see her this way." He looked to Ron. "What do you think I should do?"

"Make her happy, of course," Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's brilliant. And just how am I supposed to manage it?"

Ron laughed at him. "You're kidding... right?"

"Come on, it's your big idea," Harry pressed.

Ron shook his head. As he headed off to class, he called over his shoulder, "Don't ask me. I'm the thick one, remember?"



## Chapter Thirty-four

### BIRDS OF A FEATHER

September 14, 1996

Harry sat stock still, cross-legged, as he had for – minutes? Hours? Days? This odd training from Professor Covelli wasn't as mad as Divination; it even made sense in a way, and that was more than he could say about Snape's efforts in the year prior. Still... he could do as she asked of him, and he could hear and comprehend her explanations, but in the end he doubted that it made any sort of difference.

Covelli signalled him to end his meditation. "How do you feel?" she asked.

He blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "Lighter."

Covelli crooked an eyebrow. "Is that so? Explain, please?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know; it's just the first thing that came to mind."

"Rested, perhaps?" Covelli probed.

"I suppose so, yes," Harry agreed. Covelli concealed her feelings well, almost as good as Dumbledore, but he was sure he caught a flicker of doubt – something in the flecks of colour in her eyes, it seemed.

"Does this still seem as ridiculous to you as seeking the meaning of life by staring into the remains of poorly steeped tea?" Covelli asked.

Harry almost laughed, but he had no intention of letting down his guard. Covelli had studied with Dumbledore; she was just as manipulative, Harry was certain. In fact she was better at it, he had decided after their first meeting. She sought to know his likes and dislikes, appealed to his sense of humour, and tried to understand him in order to lead him by using what she understood – all the while

saying next to nothing about herself. She had made no attempt at Legilimency during the course of their first three meetings, and none thus far during the fourth. He wasn't sure what he would do when she did, as she surely would. Covelli was very close to Hermione, obviously, which further discomfited him. Harry's thoughts about Hermione were normally off-limits, as far as he was concerned, and even more so in this case.

"What's next, then?" Harry asked.

Covelli searched his face impassively. "This work is not about tasks or lists, Mr. Potter. This work addresses the reorganization and integration of the mind."

Harry was confused. "I thought it was about clearing my mind," he protested.

Covelli slowly shook her head. "That is only a first step. If you were going to rely on clearing of the mind as a defence, then your mind would have to remain constantly clear. This is not likely given your age and the nature of your life. Any organising principle – any defence – must be constantly present."

"Snape wanted me to clear my mind - get rid of emotions, he said," Harry explained.

Covelli frowned. "He was describing his own organising principle, Mr. Potter – a principle suitable for life in darkness. This Snape... he could have destroyed you. He was not competent to teach this subject."

"He's not competent to teach any subject," Harry grumbled, "but at least that much has been changed."

Covelli let out a weak laugh. "Yet this man was assigned to teach for many years. You see... Dumbledore, he is not an effective judge of character."

"He hasn't been when it comes to hiring teachers," Harry said evenly.

Covelli very nearly smirked; Harry felt it coming on but it didn't quite materialise. "Should I feel injured by that observation?" she asked with a hint of teasing in her voice.

Harry kept his tone as even as before. "Only if you're another one of Dumbledore's mistakes," he said.

"Oh yes, I am certainly one of Dumbledore's mistakes," Covelli returned, "but that is not the matter at hand. Here is our situation as I see it: you must learn Occlumency if you wish to retain both your sanity and independence, and I must be the one to teach it to you. This will not work without some small measure of trust. Trust requires openness and honesty. I am not sure if you are prepared for honesty as I measure it, Mr. Potter."

She's certainly as odd as Dumbledore's usual fare, Harry thought. "If that's what it takes to be done with this subject, then yes I am," he said.

"Very well. You frighten me," she said simply.

Harry sat there in shock. "W-why?" he managed at last.

"Everything I've been able to glean from others suggests that there's very little difference between your upbringing and that of Tom Riddle," she said. "For Dumbledore to live through the last fifty years and still commit you to that experience... of all the incomprehensible things that he has done, all the unconscionable things... this is unforgivable, to my mind."

Harry certainly hadn't expected anything so scathing – 'unforgivable' was a stronger term than he was willing to apply to the Headmaster, even if he still didn't entirely trust the man. "Erm... well, he had reasons for putting me where he did," Harry offered. "He could have been more involved, though; it was worse than it had to be, I think."

Covelli seemed to think on this. "You were with your mother's relations... blood protection, yes?" she confirmed.

Harry nodded. "Petunia is my Mum's sister," he said. "My Mum, she... did something, I guess; it kept Voldemort from killing me, and –"

Covelli's eyes narrowed. "But Dumbledore sealed the blood protection, yes?"

Harry's eyes followed suit. "He did mention a charm."

"Then he made the choices," Covelli concluded. "Dumbledore does nothing without a plan in mind. The plan may be flawed – badly flawed, they often are – but the plan is always in place."

Harry decided to go along for the moment. "And this big plan of his was... what? Keep Potter from getting a big head?" he asked. "Dumbledore already admitted that much."

"That is a consequence of his plan, surely not the plan itself," Covelli said. Her voice lowered; Harry thought that the room seemed to darken as she went on, "Dumbledore seems happy for you to walk the same road as Tom Riddle walked. He needed a mythic hero in the event that the dragon rose again. Mythic heroes are dangerous, Mr. Potter. Sometimes this mythic hero discharges his responsibilities and then becomes as much a horror as his nemesis. How convenient for Dumbledore that your role was sealed by prophecy, no?"

"You know about the prophecy?" Harry shouted. He instantly drew his wand and trained it on Covelli's forehead.

Covelli didn't follow suit; she even failed to flinch. "Dumbledore, he had reason to reveal it," she said calmly. "I am to teach you the art of Occlumency; do you not think it likely that I would eventually access this prophecy in the course of instruction?"

Harry pulled back but kept his wand's aim true. "You will answer my questions," he said angrily. "When I'm finished asking them, I'll decide whether I trust you. If I trust you, we'll continue. If not, we're finished."

"I agree; as I said, sufficient trust is needed. I will answer what can be answered," Covelli told him, "but some things are protected under oaths, magical and otherwise."

“When were you Dumbledore’s apprentice?” Harry demanded.

“From June of 1943 until the latter part of 1945,” Covelli answered. “By the coming of the winter, he no longer considered me his apprentice.”

Harry thought about the dates for a moment. “That’s why you called him Tom Riddle,” he said. “You knew Riddle, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Covelli said.

“Why did you leave?” Harry asked.

“Clarify your question, Mr. Potter,” Covelli instructed him. “Do you wish to know why I left the apprenticeship, or why I left the magical world?”

“You... you left the magical world? But Hermione was with you, so you had to know... and you’re here, and Dumbledore told you the prophecy...?” Harry tried to understand, but he was left with more questions than when he had begun the questioning.

“I have not lived in the magical world, not as it is defined by most, since the end of 1945,” Covelli explained. “I retained some connections over the years – your Professor McGonagall is one, Madam Bones from your Ministry is another. My second husband was a wizard, but he too chose to live largely outside the bounds of this world.”

“What are you to Hermione?” Harry asked. “She seems to take to you almost like her Mum. The only reason I’m giving you a chance is that I trust her.”

“It’s not appropriate for me to answer that,” Covelli said.

Harry took a different direction. “All right... you spent fifty years with the Muggles... what sort of work did you do?”

Covelli smiled. "I am a physician, Mr. Potter. I hold a medical doctorate as well as a doctor of philosophy degree."

"You took care of Hermione, then, after... er... after everything that happened to her..." Harry trailed off.

"If you wish to know anything about my relationship with Hermione, you must enquire with her," Covelli said. "I do know what transpired at the Grangers' home, of course. May I ask, have you received care as a result of those events?"

Harry frowned. "I'm fine," he said, "I did what had to be done."

"Based upon our time together thus far, I believe that you are anything but fine," Covelli returned, "but we are not here to address my professional curiosity. Dumbledore wishes me to see if you are able to occlude specific thoughts. He was no clearer than that, of course. I expect this regards the keeping of a secret of some sort. Tell me, do you feel prepared to defend yourself against mental probing?"

"Am I supposed to keep you out, or misdirect you?" Harry asked.

"You need to repel me for a period of thirty minutes," Covelli said. "Dumbledore did explain the results of your failed instruction. I had hoped to assist you in finding your organising principle before conducting a probe. However Dumbledore, he tells me that the need is immediate, yes?"

Harry tried not to show his nervousness. Thirty minutes sounded like forever, he thought. Still, he needed to know if he could do it; he owed that to the Grangers. "You're right about a secret. It's important that I'm able to keep it – very important."

Covelli pursed her lips. "I am quite unaccustomed to doing this in a formal way, after so many years..." She went silent and then seemed to look right through Harry, and he steeled himself for the invasion to come.

He heard no incantation; the first indication that she had done anything at all was a sudden strong pressure at his temples. Something tried to slip into his head; the sensation was very different than either Snape's hammering attacks or Dumbledore's gentle breeze. His heart raced and he was aware that instinct was taking over. He saw flashes of memory, too brief and fragmented for him to make out. Suddenly he saw something familiar – it was embarrassing and painful and assuredly none of Covelli's business. She took an interest in the image of the cupboard and began to follow the thread.

"No!" he shouted; it sounded as if it was coming from someone else's mouth. He pushed hard at the pressure, and fell headlong into Covelli's eyes.

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The manor house was a shambles, barely held together by tattered vestiges of magic. The foul creature ran from her down corridors and through the remains of two ballrooms; she followed relentlessly.

"Anything! I will give anything! Wealth beyond imagining! Power... it's power you want, isn't it?" it pleaded. Its formal robes and cloak were as tattered as the sagging house around them. Its eyes pleaded with her, as though she should allow it a name. She refused; the bastard was no longer worthy of a name – she didn't believe that it deserved to be considered human.

"Y-your family and mine, we have been allied for a dozen generations! They will never forgive you!" it cried out.

Her eyes narrowed and trained on his. "You killed my brother, you and your filth," she said coldly. "Alliances no longer matter; the rest of my family no longer matters. Where is Bormann?"

"I... I don't know!" it insisted.

"Where is Bormann?" she repeated.

"I couldn't possibly tell you! He... he's mad! He'll kill me!" it whined.

“What do you think I’m going to do to you?” she asked.

Its eyes went wide and its jaw went slack. “No... NO!”

“Then you will tell me... where – is – Bormann?” she asked once more.

“I mustn’t... you can’t make me...” it whimpered.

“Oh, but I can,” she hissed. It raised its hands to its head and screamed.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

“He... I... I CAN’T...” it stammered. She felt the memory block – it was like a wall that stood in her path – but it was no matter. The power filled her now; it came at first with the sense of shock, like being doused with cold water, but then it was like becoming a goddess. She idly wondered if all the ancient alchemists had misunderstood the transitory nature of the Darkening as she systematically dismantled the wall that stood between her and Otto Bormann’s whereabouts. She would find him, and wherever Bormann was, Riddle would be as well.

Blood began to trickle from its ears. She increased the pressure; she could feel the wall cracking as the mind under her control fell to pieces. The answer was just on the other side – and then she would have her revenge...

“STOP!” an all-too-familiar voice commanded.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” she sneered in a voice entirely unlike her own.

“You must end this NOW!” Dumbledore demanded.

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“STOP!” Covelli called out. “EXPELLIARMUS!” A burst of raw power struck Harry; his arm snapped back painfully and his wand burned in his hand.

“Y-you were going to find Riddle and kill him, and Dumbledore stopped you!” he blurted out. “That’s what happened, isn’t it?”

Covelli was shaking. “Did you feel it?” she managed to say.

Harry pressed on. “Did Riddle kill your brother?” he asked.

“Did you feel it?” she asked forcefully. “Did you feel the power, Mr. Potter?”

Harry reluctantly nodded. He had felt it just as if it had filled him up. Covelli drew close; she said in an icy whisper, “Neither of us is ever to feel that power again – is that understood?”

Harry nodded again, much more quickly. “I didn’t set out to pry. It’s just that you were seeing... um...”

“Your mind is composed of walls set around fears,” Covelli said hoarsely. “The walls are enough to meet Dumbledore’s requirement, but they will not be enough in the face of darkness. Go.”

“Um... you’ll tell him that I was good enough, then?” Harry asked.

“Go,” she whispered.

There was finality in her voice, so he asked, “Are we... are we meeting here on Tuesday, then?”

Her voice was barely audible. “That will be for you to decide.”

“Are you sure that I should leave? Will you be all right?” he asked.

After a lengthy silence she offered a wan smile that surprised him. “Thank you for asking, Mr. Potter. Perhaps I will be all right, indeed,” she said softly; Harry thought she sounded almost surprised at the idea.

He wandered along the corridors and wondered how much that Hermione knew about Covelli's past. He wasn't sure what he knew, of course; he only knew what he had seen, and that she was afraid of whatever sort of power that she had long ago invoked. He figured that Hermione was in the library, which led him to think about his friend's book-filled table in the Restricted Section and Covelli's odd reaction to the books. His wanderings took him to the library, but the seventh-year Ravenclaw who manned the desk claimed not to have seen Hermione all morning.

Something that he overheard from a passing gaggle of young Gryffindor girls led him toward the lakeside. It was a surprisingly warm and sunny day by September standards. Scores of students littered the grassy hill that ran down to the rocky shore. He caught a few waves and a few stares as he made his way down toward the Lake.

Hermione was sitting atop one of the larger flat rocks that flirted with the water. She was dressed very much like she had been at the Burrow, the night when Dumbledore had undone him and when Ron had started to come undone and when Hermione had been the one to stand with him. Her denims were rolled up almost to the knee; she had cast her shoes and stockings aside and her toes dangled in the cold water. It was perfectly ordinary attire for an English teenager on a free day; amidst the Muggle-borns who had come unprepared for the heat and the purebloods whose shed robes revealed jerkins or high-waisted dresses, it was almost startling.

That Hermione sat there happily conversing with Luna Lovegood was even more startling, especially when Luna was so obviously being herself. She wore her uniform shirt and tie, but had replaced the skirt with bermudas, and had traded the usual Mary Janes for the heavy boots that she had favoured during the summer. Her hat had a wide brim that snapped tight to one side. It was rather masculine and had the finished look of something Muggle-made; it was the sort of hat that one would wear fishing off of St. Ebb, Harry thought, or whilst on safari, or anywhere but Hogwarts. As he drew closer, he could see the scar that emerged from her collar and stopped just below her right ear.

Luna spotted him when he was within twenty paces. She stood up and waved her arms wildly and shouted, "Over here!" as though he stood atop the castle ramparts. Hermione covered her mouth to stifle a laugh.

Harry grimaced and then gasped as Luna slipped off the rock, dashed forward, and drew him into a clumsy hug. "Hullo, Harry!" she exclaimed. "Do you like my hat?"

"Um... sure, Luna... it's... er... smashing?" Harry stammered.

She drew close to his ear and whispered, "It's from Canada." Then she pulled back and smiled at him as though she had just shared something world-changing.

"Okay," he said nervously, as dozens of Ravenclaw eyes fell upon him from the hillside.

For her part, Hermione simply grinned at him. "Sit with us," she called out. He hopped atop the rock and sat beside Hermione, and Luna took a seat beside him.

"I thought you were with Doctor Covelli," Hermione said.

Harry shook his head. "No, we just... wait! How did you know that?"

"You told me that you were meeting with her today, and she told me that she was unavailable this morning," Hermione said. "It wasn't difficult to connect the two. How was the meeting?"

"Different than the first three meetings," Harry answered.

"The first three...? You've met four times? Is she training you?" Hermione asked.

"I haven't decided yet," Harry returned.

Hermione looked puzzled and concerned all at once. "What's happened?" she asked.

Harry answered the question with another question, despite Dumbledore's admonishment to the contrary. "How much do you know about Covelli's past?"

"Enough, I think," Hermione said. "Why?"

"Something came up, something very strange," Harry said.

"Do you like bird watching?" Luna asked Harry abruptly. Hermione didn't manage to keep from sniggering.

"Erm... what sort of birds do you mean?" Harry asked, and Hermione broke into full-throated laughter.

"There are so many different kinds," Luna went on. "They're everywhere, birds – fast ones, slow ones, big ones, small ones, all different colours. Yes, birds are watching right now, from everywhere."

Hermione stopped laughing, and began to replace her stockings. "Thank you, Luna. Do you still need a hand with your Arithmancy later?"

"I would prefer the contribution of your intellect and expertise, but if your hand is all you have to offer, then I accept," Luna answered. "Four o'clock would be suitable."

"I'll meet you in the Library, then," Hermione said as she laced up her trainers. She gave Harry a look, and he stood.

Luna tugged at Harry's sleeve. "Lest I forget, Harry, I want to thank you for meaning well on the first day of classes. I hope you know that overstepping one's bounds increases the chance of a nargle infestation in one's knickers?" Her eyebrows wiggled strangely.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Luna!"

Luna laughed too loudly. "That wasn't true, of course. Nargles in knickers! They wouldn't fare well, of course!"

Ron called from the hillside, "Oi, Harry!" and Harry offered silent thanks to any deity who was watching over him.

Harry leaned toward Luna as soon as she stood. "I'm sorry, Luna," he said quietly. "I should have warned you before I said anything."

Luna smiled at him earnestly. "There's no need to be sorry, Harry – be considerate. Consideration tends to attract birds of all kinds, you know."

Ron quickly made his way down. "I thought you'd be under lock and key all day, mate!" he said excitedly as he approached.

Luna abruptly extended her hand, and wouldn't budge until Ron shook it profusely. "Hello, Ronald; it's a lovely day, wouldn't you agree?" she sang out.

"Er... hello, Luna," he said gruffly without entirely meeting her eye. "Nice hat."

"Do you really like it? It's from Canada. I can get you a matching one, if you like," she whispered forcefully.

Ron managed a horror-tinged smile. "Uh... that's not really... what I mean is, you don't need to... er..."

"Don't worry, Ronald," she sighed. "I'll save it until Christmas time, or until the first of March. I won't even write my name on the wrapping – it can be our secret."

Something changed in Ron's expression, even as his smile faded. "It's not like that... it's just... it must be an expensive hat. You can't be spending a sack of Galleons; that wouldn't be right."

"Money is meaningless unless put to good purpose," Luna said. She took off her hat, unsnapped the brim and deposited it on Ron's head. "Eight-and-a-quarter, I believe; there should be room for your head to breathe," she decided. Ron stood in mute shock.

Hermione sniggered. "Um... I think it would look good on you if it fit properly," she said.

"Harry...?" Ron began, with not a little pleading in his voice.

Harry shrugged. "You do look like a silly arse, but it's nothing to do with the hat," he smirked.

Ron growled at Harry; he whipped off the hat, but handed it gently to Luna. "Really, Luna, something like this would be too much," he insisted. "We hardly know each other, right?"

Luna returned the hat to her head, the brim still down. "It would keep the sun from burning the back of your neck and your nose. You have darker freckles there, you know."

"Oh?" Ron said, and absently rubbed his nose.

Luna looked up at him, squinting in the sun. "You do have a big head, as well," she said.

"I've been telling him that for years," Harry quipped.

"That tears it!" Ron boomed. Harry laughed and scampered up the hill as Ron gave chase. Over his shoulder, he saw Hermione glance pointedly at the castle and nodded in return. Ron lunged forward at the crest of the hill, and managed to catch Harry's ankle. They both crashed to the grass, and proceeded to wrestle around like a couple of first-years. Harry knew that Ron wasn't serious about it, and they each pinned the other a couple of times before Harry wriggled free.

Ron brushed grass from his hair and then crossed his arms with mock sternness. "We need to settle this like men, Potter – in the air, of course," he blustered.

"I have one thing to take care of, and then –" Harry began.

Ron cut him off. "That's the theme for the year, isn't it?" he huffed.

Harry sighed. "Look, mate..."

"I know you're madly busy," Ron admitted. "It's just frustrating. Neville and Seamus and Dean... they're good fellows, but it's not the same."

"You're my closest friend, Ron – my first friend, right?" Harry said. "I know it isn't the same. I'll make a better effort. We fly at four this afternoon."

"Excellent," Ron said; he sounded very relieved. "Be sure you bring your Nimbus, not that bloody bike! Are you sure about four, though? Will you be done with her by then?"

Harry was puzzled. "What?"

Ron let forth a barking laugh. "Merlin! Do you think that I'm blind? I saw the look she shot you – it's the look that says 'meet me in the library so we can save the world'. Are you sure you'll be finished by four?"

Harry frowned. "It's not like that. I was meeting with Covelli earlier and something strange happened. I'm hoping Hermione can make sense of it."

"Something strange, you say?" Ron's brow furrowed. "Well, I hope it's nothing serious. I could get to like Covelli, if the Slytherins don't hex her back to Italy."

"What's this about the Slytherins?" Harry asked.

"First day, she tossed her copies of the texts on the floor and cast Incendio on them," Ron explained. "She said to everyone that V-V-Voldemort is a half-blood, and she said Bagshot and everybody else who's written magical history in England are zenic... um... zenta..."

"Xenophobes," Hermione said from behind them. "You really are awake in History class now, aren't you?"

"Who can sleep? It's like a duelling ring in there!" Ron laughed. "I mean the only Slytherins who aren't ready to curse her are Zabini and

Davis; Daphne Greengrass looks like she wants to burn a hole in Covelli with her eyes, for Merlin's sake!"

"Yes, she does," Hermione said heavily.

Ron turned to Hermione. "I was just telling Harry that I knew you were off to swap secrets or whatever. He's to be on the pitch and ready to fly at four this afternoon, right? I don't care if you discover the Chamber of, um, Stuff That'll Turn Lord Thingy Into Pudding – he's free by four, right?"

There was a sudden gleam in Hermione's eye. "Into pudding? There must be something in the Restricted Section on that!"

Ron gaped at her until the corners of her mouth twitched. "You've been around us too long," he laughed.

"Look, Ron, I don't have anything to say that you can't hear. If you want to stick with us, it's fine by me," Harry offered.

"Nah, that's even worse! I mean, if there are no life-or-death secrets... well, where's the fun in that?" Ron looked around the grounds at the scattered groups of students sunning and playing and carrying on. "Besides, I have work to do. As a Prefect, I have a certain responsibility to the rest of the students..." His eyes locked on a passing Hufflepuff in an unexpectedly brief sundress.

"I don't seem to recall that responsibility in the Prefect's Handbook," Hermione chided.

Ron wagged a finger at her. "You've obviously stopped keeping up – revised version, you know?" He gave a dueller's bow, and headed off to the sundress-wearing witch and a knot of her friends. "Hello, ladies..." he began in an unnaturally low voice, and Harry winced.

Hermione shook her head. "Thick as a shepherd's pie, that one," she said. "Shall we?" She began to walk in the general direction of the castle, and added, "It's strange to see everyone so... I don't know... casual? Relaxed?"



Harry nodded in agreement. "I don't think I've ever seen it quite like this. There are three houses mixing freely, at least."

Hermione let her eyes sweep the grounds. "I see a few Slytherins... not many, though."

"So... when did you and Luna become so friendly?" Harry asked casually.

Hermione tugged her hand free. "The thing is..." She cleared her throat, and Harry knew that wasn't a good thing. "Luna and I were in contact for a good part of August."

Harry stopped walking. "What? How is that possible?"

"Doctor Covelli gave me a set of Repeating Journals," Hermione explained. "She thought I needed to be in contact with someone my own age, someone who might understand how..." She let out a frustrated huff. "Look, I chose Luna, all right? I'm glad I did. She's very different than I expected. Luna's passing strange sometimes, but she's very bright and very perceptive. She helped me, Harry – quite a lot."

"When she was in St. Ebb, she was in contact with you?" Harry asked.

Hermione lowered her eyes. "Yes."

Harry bit back his first impulse to shout. At least she's ashamed, he thought angrily. "No wonder you felt guilty about shutting me out!" he snapped. "It wasn't a one-time decision, apparently."

"It couldn't be you," she said. "I couldn't talk to you then. I'm sorry, but that's the truth."

He supposed it was because he'd nearly gotten her killed, not once but twice – several times, in truth. He supposed that was the reason, but he wanted to know for certain. When he gave voice to the question, there was anger in it mixed with sadness and regret and perhaps a spot of fear: "Why?"

Hermione stood there before him, rigid and terror-stricken. At first, he thought that he might have asked it too loudly except that he'd not drawn the attention that shouting would have commanded. "Never mind – you don't have to answer that," he added quickly.

"You deserve to know," she forced out. "Not here, though."

"You're right," Harry said. He didn't want to play this out in front of the entire school. He grasped her fingers lightly, just enough to tug her in a different direction; she followed and he let go.

When it was clear that they were headed somewhere other than the castle, the lake or the pitch, Hermione asked, "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere more private," Harry answered.

"There's nothing in this direction other than Hagrid's hut and the path to Hogsmeade," Hermione protested.

Harry nodded. "That's right."

Hermione's lips thinned. "It wouldn't be right to use Hagrid's hut without first asking."

"That's why we're not going there," Harry said; he increased their pace.

Hermione struggled against his grip. "Harry, this is not a Hogsmeade day!"

Harry let loose her hand. "Do you agree that I'm part of the castle staff?" he asked.

Hermione's brow wrinkled. "As the Headmaster's apprentice, you have a lot of privileges... you're providing some instruction... yes, I suppose you're a member of staff."

"There's a Staff Handbook. I can accompany students to Hogsmeade at my discretion – can you believe it?" Harry explained.

Hermione gaped at him. "To Hogsmeade? But... when you couldn't convince your aunt and uncle to sign a permission... do you mean to say that Professor McGonagall could have let you go?"

"No, she would had to have taken me there. Can you imagine a day out in Hogsmeade with McGonagall?" Harry shuddered. "I'd have taken the passage to Honeydukes even if I'd known."

"I've never heard this mentioned, Harry, not once," Hermione said slowly. "Perhaps the professors are concerned about favouritism? Surely there are limitations...?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe they want to avoid hundreds of requests? As for limits, the only one I found is that underage students have to be returned by curfew. Well, Dumbledore can overrule a decision, of course; he can overrule just about everything if he wants."

"Are you sure this applies to you?" Hermione asked nervously.

"McGonagall gave me the Handbook," Harry answered. "No one has mentioned any exceptions, not even Dumbledore."

Hermione looked into the distance, where the grounds came to an end. "If you're certain..."

"I am," Harry said.

"The Three Broomsticks, then?" Hermione asked him.

"Above the Three Broomsticks, actually; that's where I rented rooms," Harry answered.

Hermione grew very quiet; she said nothing as they passed through the small pedestrian gate and began to round the lake. When the train station came into view, she asked, "Has it been lonely?"

"What, rooming in Hogsmeade?" Harry considered that for a few moments, and then answered, "A little, I suppose. I haven't thought much about it. If I hadn't stayed alone so much in August, I think the

nights would be strange. Besides, I'm not the only lodger; Detheridge has the rooms below."

"Professor Detheridge doesn't live in the castle? That's curious," Hermione said.

"Not everyone lives in the castle, at least not all the time," Harry told her. "Madam Pince lives somewhere in Hogsmeade. Vector regularly leaves on the weekends. I think Madam Marchbanks is commuting, and I'm not sure that Croaker stays at Hogwarts either. I know Mrs. Tonks returns to London most evenings."

Hermione seemed quite surprised. "All of them seem to be at hand whenever needed," she said. "I wonder how they manage it all?"

"Hogwarts looks a bit different from the staff room," Harry said.

"Better? Worse?" Hermione asked.

"Different," Harry decided. "Did you know that Flitwick's wife died the year before we came to Hogwarts? She used to live in the castle with him. Sprout's married as well, but I haven't met her husband yet."

"It stands to reason that they have lives beyond teaching, of course," Hermione said, but she sounded a touch uncertain.

"Dumbledore and McGonagall don't, not so far as I can tell. Snape didn't, but that's not surprising," Harry said. "Can you picture Snape off to the pub with his mates?"

"I'm not certain I can picture any of the professors off to the pub with friends," Hermione admitted. "Even seeing them in the Three Broomsticks on Hogsmeade days was passing strange."

"I wonder if any of them will be there today?" Harry thought aloud. He rifled through his pockets.

"Are you missing something?" Hermione asked.

"No... no... here it is," Harry said. He withdrew a folded square of iridescent fabric. Detheridge had told him where to purchase one of the Any-Colour Expand-O-Robes that he'd worn on the Hogwarts Express; Harry thought it was one of the most dead useful things he'd yet acquired. "Black is as good as anything." He held the square by one corner and shook vigorously. Hermione's brows climbed as the square blossomed into a basic black robe. He slipped it over her shoulders, and added, "You'd stand out a bit in denims and that shirt."

"I'd not thought of that; thank you, Harry," Hermione said as she tugged her arms into the sleeves, and then proceeded to enquire about everything that Harry had learned about the charms on the robe.

She stopped talking and became noticeably uneasy as they entered the Three Broomsticks. The public room was busy. Harry scanned the room for Moody or other Order members. McGonagall was seated at a table with Vector and another witch he didn't recognise; they were rather close to the door that led to the stairs. He hesitated for a moment, but it wasn't as though he or Hermione were doing anything against the rules. Hermione didn't move as he made for the door, so he reached back and took her hand again.

McGonagall caught his eye as they approached and nodded. "Good morning, Mr. Potter... or afternoon, rather. Have you completed your readings for our next session?"

"I'm ahead by one reading, actually," Harry returned; McGonagall's lips quirked into a small smile.

"Miss Granger!" Vector exclaimed. "What are you doing in Hogsmeade? You are completely out of bounds!"

"She's with me," Harry said brashly. "She'll be returned to the castle long before curfew."

Vector stammered, "But... but... Miss Granger, as much as I... that is to say, I realise that you... Minerva, what will you do about this?"

McGonagall gave Harry an appraising look, and said, "It seems that you've taken the time to read the Staff Handbook." Realisation dawned on Vector's face. McGonagall's lips thinned considerably, and she added, "I offer you this advice, Mr. Potter: be circumspect in the use of this privilege."

"Indeed!" Vector said quickly. "There are those who will surely view such matters in the poorest possible light." She turned to Hermione. "It is not solely a matter of Mr. Potter's rights and privileges as a member of staff, you see; some will instantly assume that you are taking inappropriate liberties. This is the sort of thing that will easily ignite jealousy amongst your community of peers."

"Thank you for your concern, Professor," Hermione said evenly.

McGonagall audibly sighed and returned her gaze to Harry. "Mr. Potter... Harry... I am aware that the Headmaster does not wish you to lead a solitary existence for the remainder of your studies, and I share his concerns. I also understand why you may feel that life in the castle is now awkward, but perhaps you should reconsider the matter of your rooms. Professor Snape took his position at the age of twenty-one, and thus a fair number of the students had been schoolmates of his; it was a most difficult adjustment for him, as I recall..."

Harry squeezed his fists tightly. "It's Mister Snape now, Professor, and I'll ask you to never compare me to him again," he said coldly.

There was an awkward silence, at last broken by McGonagall. "You are here now, so you may as well continue with your recreation. The Headmaster tells me that the both of you and Mr. Weasley will be otherwise occupied tomorrow, and perhaps Monday as well. I expect that you'll find time this evening to address your studies, Miss Granger? "

Hermione went rigid. "I'm addressing my studies, Professor," she said flatly.

McGonagall's expression softened, much to Harry's surprise. "Your work thus far has been merely acceptable, which is far beneath you," she said.

Vector appeared surprised. "Is that so? Miss Granger, if your arithmancy special project is taking away from other studies, then perhaps a less aggressive plan is in order?"

"No thank you, Professor," Hermione said. "I'm only concerned with my eventual NEWT scores now; as I understand it, acceptable performance will qualify me to sit the examinations?"

McGonagall's face fell; Vector appeared to be in shock. Not knowing what to do, Harry said quickly, "Have a pleasant afternoon, Professors. If you'll excuse us...?"

McGonagall's curt nod of acknowledgement turned to stone when she realised that they were heading not to an empty table but to the stairs. She called after them, but Harry couldn't make it all out over the din – it was something to do with keeping doors open. Harry expected that Hermione would grind to a halt, or at least blush; she merely rolled her eyes. He couldn't decide whether she no longer cared what McGonagall thought, or was so focused on something else that the comments weren't registering; he thought that he sensed a bit of both.

"What in Merlin's name was that?" Harry asked as soon as they were well past the public room.

Hermione shrugged. "I've revised my priorities. Professor McGonagall isn't ready to accept that." Harry tried not to goggle at her; she seemed comfortable with whatever choices she had made, and he forced himself to let the issue drop.

She watched with undisguised fascination as he took his wand and permitted their entry through the wards cast on his rooms. The fascination quickly fell aside. Well before Harry offered her a seat and she instead made for the window, arms crossed, her unease was palpable. He couldn't recall being so absolutely certain that he was feeling someone else's feelings. There was something so like

Hermione about the feelings coursing through him that he couldn't deny it, even though he couldn't say what that something was. He didn't like knowing that she was afraid, that much was certain.

"Did you create those wards yourself, Harry?" Hermione asked. "They're very impressive." It's fear, raw knee-knocking fear. Something else, too, but it doesn't have a name, it's unfamiliar.

"Bill Weasley's teaching me," Harry answered. "Wards aren't so complicated, once someone explains them. Well... Bill's brilliant, not to mention being very patient."

"He was a Head Boy, after all. Besides, nothing's ever stopped you when you're interested in the subject at hand," Hermione said. Another wave of fear, weaker this time – different, at least. Nervousness? Why won't she look at me?

"I meant what I said, you know," Harry told her through gritted teeth. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want."

"I do, Harry; I do have to tell you," she returned without facing him. Stomach rolling! Room spinning! It seemed so intense; everything had been sharper and more uncomfortable since Dumbledore had explained what Snape had done, but this was the worst by far. He sat on the sofa, closed his eyes, and tried the simplest of Professor Covelli's meditation exercises; the rolling began to subside.

Hermione was nearer now; she was concerned, and so was her voice. "Harry? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said absently. "I don't like it when you're so frightened. You don't need to spew up over telling me something, you know." The sofa cushions shifted under him; clearly she had sat down. He returned to his exercise, because she was silent.

"How did you know that I felt nauseous?" she asked quietly. "Were you guessing, or... did you just use Legilimency?"

Harry's stomach settled, but his head was throbbing. "I didn't use anything; I told you what Snape did to me," he snapped. "He left me



open to everything. It's been worse since Dumbledore figured it out, for some reason."

When Hermione began to speak, it was slow and measured as though she was thinking aloud. "You've been picking up everything around you, because he never really taught you how to shut it out. You've been angrier when everyone else is angry, sadder when everyone else is sad... how long, Harry? How long has this been happening?"

He rubbed at his temples. "Dumbledore figures it's been since the spring, since Snape was supposed to be teaching me." Covelli's exercise seemed to be working, which was not something he'd expected.

"I see," Hermione said. He opened his eyes in time to see a flash of something profoundly painful in her eyes; he broke eye contact as quickly as he could, for fear that he might chase the pain to its source. When he glanced up again, she looked as though she'd felt nothing at all.

Harry ventured, "Hermione, I want to help you, but —"

"Help me with what, exactly?" she cut him off cheerfully. "I'll be fine, given time — honestly. I'm just sorry you had to deal with this for so long. I wish I'd known straight away; things would —"

"Please don't say things would be different. Everyone wishes things were different," Harry interrupted.

"Yes, well... you did something to shake it off just now. Has Doctor Covelli taught you something that will help?" Hermione asked.

Harry frowned. "She's been teaching me different exercises — meditations, she says. I suppose it did help just now," he admitted begrudgingly. "Hermione, do you really trust her? Should I trust her?"

Hermione hesitated for quite a long time. He could feel conflict in her, though the feeling was not nearly as intense as before he'd done the exercise. He stilled himself and the feeling faded further. At length,

she bore herself up in the way that he had associated with her since the first day on the Express. "Doctor Covelli saved my life, Harry, and I mean that in the literal sense," she said. "I trust her, but I'm not going to tell you whether or not you should do the same. Even if she's trustworthy, she may not be the proper sort of instructor for you; that's something you have to decide. What happened this morning, then?"

"I saw things," Harry said, "things from her past."

Hermione's brow rose. "You were inside her mind?" Her curiosity was definitely piqued, but he suspected she wasn't going to ask him outright for details.

"She left the wizarding world for fifty years," Harry said. "Do you know why she left?"

Hermione chewed on her lower lip for a moment. "She was Professor Dumbledore's apprentice in the last years of the war with Grindelwald, and she left at about the time that the war ended. I assumed that it had something to do with the war. She's a pureblooded witch, and whatever happened was enough to drive her into the muggle world; honestly, I didn't want to ask after it. Is that what you saw? Did you see the reason that she left?"

"Part of it, I think," Harry said.

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said firmly. "I trust her, Harry, but you have to make the proper decision for yourself."

"She's afraid of me; she's afraid that I'll end up like Voldemort," Harry blurted out. "How am I supposed to trust her when she doesn't trust me?"

"She... she said that?" Hermione gasped. "She actually told you that?"

"She thinks Dumbledore has set me up to be some kind of hero... a mythic hero, I think she said," Harry explained. "She said that Dumbledore had me raised to be like Tom Riddle, and he was

barking mad for doing it; apparently these heroes of hers end up turning dark.”

Hermione looked composed again, but something about her felt terribly shaken. “R-riddle was a student when Doctor Covelli was an apprentice,” she said. “The things you saw, Harry... were they about Tom Riddle?”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “She was looking for him. She wanted to kill him. Dumbledore stopped her.”

Hermione sagged. Harry drew closer, but she gave an agitated wave. “I made her relive it; how could she not? She came back here because of me... actually, Professor Dumbledore coerced her but he used me to do it... and for him to ask her to practice Occlumency and Legilimency with you... how could he do that to her?” She buried her head in her hands. “She must be miserable! This is her thanks for helping me?”

“She could have said ‘no’,” Harry pointed out, “but she didn’t do that. You can’t blame yourself for her choices.”

Hermione let out a hollow laugh from behind her hands. “Of all people, Harry, you should be the very last to tell me that.”

“Fine, I deserve that,” Harry said. He tentatively brought his hand to rest on her shoulder. “I am glad that she helped you, for whatever reason she did it.”

Hermione’s shoulders heaved a few times. She slowly lowered her hands; her eyes were red-rimmed. “You’d never turn dark, Harry. He tried to make me think it, but you’d never – ” She stopped instantly, her eyes wide.

Harry’s mouth went dry and a surge of anger went through him. Unlike most of the other times, it felt as though the surge passed through him and receded into the distance. “Voldemort tried to make you think that I’d turn dark?” he asked as calmly as he could manage. “Is that why you didn’t want me to know where you were?”

Hermione flinched and Harry's stomach rolled at that. "Harry, please don't be angry with me... I never gave into him, I swear!" she insisted. "It was so hard... it was as though he reached into every single thought, every memory, and tried to poison them all. Even afterward... have you ever stared at the sun? He left an afterimage, just like the sun leaves. If it wasn't for Doctor Covelli, I don't know if it ever would have faded..."

He ran his hand in slow circles around the back of her shoulder. "I'm not angry with you, Hermione – don't think that. I had no idea... it only lasted a few seconds; I thought he was just looking for the prophecy. That would have been awful enough."

There was a tremor in Hermione's voice. "It wasn't just seconds - it went on forever... he was everywhere; I couldn't get away. He's still there in my dreams – the afterimage, I mean. Doctor Covelli showed me a way to take control and it's effective, but I still have to send the thought of him away every night. I don't know how you survived last year, Harry; I honestly don't know."

"I wish you didn't understand," Harry said.

Hermione sighed. "It's like seeing the Thestrals. These aren't the sorts of things I'd like to have in common with you, but here we are."

"If you'd like to go away with your parents for a while, I think everyone would support you," Harry said gently.

Hermione sat up sharply. "What?"

"I don't mean that you'd go away forever," Harry added quickly. "I just think that if you need more time, people would understand. I'd understand."

Her eyes were slightly narrowed. "How do you know that my parents went away?"

"Er... you mentioned it that first night," Harry said quickly.

Her eyes narrowed a bit more. "Harry...?"

"I'm helping Dumbledore with the arrangements... that's all I should say," Harry allowed.

She continued to eye him curiously, but said, "I agree; don't say anything more."

Harry took a moment and composed himself. He took his hand away from her shoulder, but she followed it by budging closer to him. He took another moment to settle himself, and then said, "I'm concerned about you, right? I can't be there for you now, not like before. I'm trying, but Dumbledore's set something like full NEWT tuition at double speed, and Detheridge is a struggle – a good struggle, I think – and Flitwick's working me over, and then McGonagall's added –"

She sought out his hand and grasped it tightly. "I was afraid that I wouldn't see you at all, so I'm hardly disappointed. You've come each time that I've asked. We've both been quite busy, actually."

"McGonagall made it sound like you haven't been busy. You didn't actually pull an Acceptable on a scroll...?" Harry's eyebrows climbed. "You did! Hermione... are you sure that you're...?"

"The research is consuming a good deal of time, Harry," Hermione explained. "This project with Vector requires as much work as any three NEWT classes. Even with the minimum number of NEWT courses, it's been a struggle at times."

Harry was stunned. "Hermione Granger is taking the minimum number of courses? Are you taking the mickey out of me?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's not as though I'm putting my feet up and knitting all day! I'll be qualified to sit for either six or seven NEWTS when the time comes, I promise you," she insisted. "This project is terribly important, and I've already learned so much. Professor Dumbledore has a theory about the nature of the Unforgivables, and I think that I've found secondary evidence to support it. If the theory's valid, then we may arrive at an answer to our central question by the springtime."

Harry leaned back to think through all that she had said. Hermione hadn't released his hands yet, and he didn't mind; that particular startling recognition led to a series of awkward and distracting thoughts. "Voldemort said something else or did something else, didn't he?" Harry said at last. "You've turned your life upside down, Hermione; there has to be something more than what you've said." She bristled, and he added, "Forget I said that. You'll tell me when you're ready – you promised that, right?"

"I don't like keeping secrets from you – it doesn't feel right – but I know there will be secrets kept," Hermione said. "I should tell you this one at least, and be done with it. Professor McGonagall thinks I'm being ridiculous, or she said as much. She probably thinks I'm as flimsy as Trelawney now."

Harry snorted, "There's no chance of that!"

Hermione was becoming more nervous, he knew. She went on, "I'm still surefooted when it comes to research and I can be clever when rising to an occasion, but when it comes to other things... intuition and feelings and the like... well, it's much more confusing!"

"I won't think badly of you, Hermione, whatever it is – I promise," Harry told her.

"That's not why I'm concerned," she sighed.

"I don't understand," Harry said.

Hermione sat in quiet contemplation for a long while. Then she looked him in the eyes, unflinching, and said, "Promise me you won't be like you were last year. Promise me that, Harry – that you won't run off and sulk and pity yourself and try to bear the whole world on your shoulders and push back everyone who cares about you. Promise that you won't go off in a rage. Promise that you won't run from me. Promise me those things, and I'll tell you."

"Erm... how bad can it be?" Harry asked nervously.

Hermione held fast. "Promise me first," she insisted.

"I won't go off and do something foolish," Harry promised, "and I certainly won't run from you. I've missed you and I've only just gotten you back, after all."

She was so anxious that he had to close his eyes again to let it flow away. "Are you sure...?" she asked. "It's all so uncertain... almost silly, actually. If it wasn't still there every night..."

Harry tugged at her hands to make her stop. "Tell me... please."

She began, "You've been in my mind – or I've been in your mind; it's hard to know which – and it's happened more than once –"

His eyes snapped open. "More than once? There was the dream, of course..."

"And the dream before that, Harry," she said as though someone else might overhear.

"Before that? Which dream...?" He trailed off as he recalled the dream following Dumbledore's casting of the secret-binding curse; he had wondered at the time if it had been real.

"We were lying down together, you were holding me... you wondered if it was something best friends do," she confirmed nervously. "I didn't know it was real until after Doctor Covelli had me use a pensieve and... Harry? Harry, would you say something?"

Harry cleared his throat, and forced the conversation forward. "So you've been in my mind, or whatever, and you saw something – or thought something, or put something together, and...?"

She nodded. "When V-Voldemort was pretending to be, you know, Sirius... I didn't know that he was a fraud, I just knew that he was off. There was something about him that felt comfortable, even when he was acting so strangely, something that felt right. I couldn't put my finger on it, Harry, not until he came to the house and he... he..."

Harry tugged his hands free and reached out to embrace her. "I'm so sorry, Hermione," he said.

She slumped down and he stopped advancing. "He was almost impossible to resist," she said weakly. "It wasn't just the power. He felt so familiar; I had to resist him and myself at the same time. He felt like YOU, Harry – he felt exactly like you."

Coldness spread through Harry. "It was a trick," he said immediately. "Dumbledore already told me that some of Voldemort's power transferred to me; he must have picked up something or another."

"It wasn't a similar feeling; he felt exactly like you," Hermione said. Her voice seemed so distant. "I told you there are very few books about Legilimency. I read one of them again, the day after. Legilimency is a projection of a wizard's own magical imprint – his aura, if you like. It's unique, like a fingerprint; even twins would have subtle differences. I could see him before me, and yet there were moments when I was sure it was you. For a while afterward, I thought that you'd been trying to break the connection. I thought that maybe you'd been there, but I know that you weren't, Harry – I just know."

Harry tried to collect himself, but he couldn't. He wanted to scream inside, but didn't know what to scream. "S-so you think there's more than just a transfer of power?" he managed.

"Yes," she said, and she opened her arms to receive the embrace that she'd avoided.

Harry held back. "He could be lurking about, then, just waiting to come through and... and you shouldn't be here, should you?"

Hermione sat up straight and reached out to him. "Think it through, Harry. Dumbledore wouldn't even meet your eyes last year, and now you're his apprentice. V-Voldemort... he couldn't possess you. He can't control you. He's seen everything I could show him, everything except the prophecy – and he may have taken that from my Dad. I've nothing more to fear from being with you." She leaned forward and clutched him tight, and he nervously brought his arms around her shoulders.



Harry broke the quiet. "I can see why you wanted nothing to do with me afterward. I was upset... all right, maybe a little angry... but it was because I didn't know."

She laughed nervously into his chest. "I suppose we're even now. I'm sorry you were kept in the dark last year."

She began to relax; her shoulders settled, and she leaned into him more firmly as her breathing slowed and deepened. Several minutes went by before he realised that he was stroking her hair, and he quickly brought his hand back to her shoulders.

"What are you thinking right now, Harry?" she asked.

"Not much," Harry said. "I was, er, 'being in the moment' – I think that's what Covelli called it. What are you thinking about?"

"Uh... I was... well... nothing important, really..." she stammered.

"What, you didn't expect that I'd ask in return?" he sniggered.

She swallowed hard and he could feel the movement of it. "I was... I was wondering if this is what best friends do?"

Harry laughed nervously, and then tried to make a joke of it. "Well, I'm not about to be stroking Ron's hair any time soon, if that's what you're asking."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything," she muttered and began to pull away.

Harry tightened his hold, not so much to startle her but enough to stop her. "That first dream... it was me, wasn't it? I wasn't just picking up on your feelings, was I?"

She was almost shaking, he realised. "It wasn't the sort of dream I usually have," she croaked.

It took very little for him to recall the way he'd felt – how he'd had to forcibly relax, how she'd felt so warm and soft in his arms. He remembered the feel of straps through her shirt, and he felt them now. He remembered being afraid of what he wanted to do, and the same fear came back to him. Now he knew. It was his fear, not hers, and it was becoming quite easy for him to tell the difference. He had no doubt now that the dreams – both of them – had been his, or had at least started as his. She had responded, but he had wanted it in the first place. I wanted her, he realised, and it frightened him to the core because he wasn't simply recollecting. "Are we... are we making this up as we go?" he asked, hopeful that his voice didn't reflect his mortal terror.

Now she was truly shaking, and his hand returned to her hair as if it had taken on a life of its own. "What do you want, Harry?" she whispered.

He felt as though he might be strangled by his own voice. "That dream... I think I want that," he forced out.

She took three heaving breaths, and he was fairly sure that he was going to faint. "You have no idea how difficult all this is... God help me for saying it... but you need to sort yourself out first, and I should finish sorting myself out as well," she said. Then she let out a terribly long sigh and burrowed into him, which seemed to run counter to what she'd just said and thus left Harry utterly confused.

"Um... what do you mean... that I... er... need to sort myself out?" he spluttered.

She pulled away slowly, and Harry let her go. "Ron believes you're still seeing Professor Lupin's daughter – are you?" she asked. "I can't let you toy with me, Harry – I just can't do that – and I can't imagine you'd do it to me. You're not like that."

Harry frowned. "I meant what I said, and I'm not seeing anyone," he insisted.

Hermione's lips thinned. "Maybe you're not seeing her, per se, but you didn't contradict Ron," she said firmly.

He bristled. "Do you think I'm lying then? Is that what you're saying?"

"Don't be snappish," she returned. "I do think you meant what you said, and I meant it when I said that this is difficult for me. We're friends; I won't run away, difficult or not. I'll help you study, if you like; I'll – I'll hold your hand, I'll spend every free minute with you if you like, but I can't let you..." Her cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry, Harry, there can't be anything like that dream – not right now. If I give into this, if we become more than friends, I need to know that you're certain – really certain."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Well, how certain are you? How am I supposed to know...?"

"I couldn't be here now if I wasn't fairly certain," she said. He risked a glance at her face; she looked stricken – her brow was damp and her eyes were watery. "As I said, I still have some sorting out of my own to face."

"If you weren't certain then you couldn't push me away... Hermione, you're not making any sense," Harry protested.

Her voice trembled. "This isn't something that makes sense, is it?"

Harry sighed. "Look, the last thing I wanted to do was to make you cry –" he began.

" – and I don't want to cry!" she snapped. "I don't want to be some sort of weepy girl – I'm not like that!"

"I'm not going to fight with you, either. I don't like it when we argue – nothing good ever comes of it," Harry said.

Hermione gave a hesitant nod. "W-what do we do now?" she asked.

Harry let out an exasperated groan. "I don't know! I wasn't trying to ask you to marry me, for Merlin's sake, and suddenly everything's

about being completely certain. Who's completely certain about something like this? It seems like you're the one with the answers here..." He winced. "Bugger! That didn't come out right – I don't even know what to say!"

"You see? There's another reason to worry about this, Harry," Hermione said quickly. "There's so much to be done, and no one can say how long we have; you can't be tongue-tied around me, for goodness' sake, and I can't be that way around you either. People who are involved argue; and if we... you know... how would we get past it? You weren't a prefect last year, Harry. You didn't see what I saw: couples going from snogging in broom closets to spitting on each other. We can't be like that! You need me - I have to help you, not distract you! I know I can't be the one to kill V-Voldemort, but I might somehow find the way to do it. I need to help you, but I can't do it if we're not speaking to each other, and..." She shuddered, and went on even more quickly, "When I came back, I didn't even know if you'd still be my friend, let alone my best friend... and now there's this – whatever it is – and I don't know what to do, and I don't like not knowing – I hate it, really – and you don't know for certain what you're feeling and what you're not – and that has to be horrible, honestly – but it all seems such a risk, and... and... what? Why are you smiling? I don't – mmph!"

Their noses bumped awkwardly and his glasses were in the way and she let out an audible gasp. Her eyes were wide with shock at first; he nearly panicked and backed off until she leaned into him and embraced him instead of pushing him away. Her lips were a little dry but very soft. Her eyes were closed when he pulled back.

When she opened her eyes they were unreadable. He reached up, tugged off his glasses and tossed them aside. "They're in the way," he said and he kissed her again. She laughed against his mouth, which was a strange sensation. He decided that he liked the way she tasted. She held him very tightly before she pulled her lips free of his. She didn't frown, but she didn't entirely smile either. She hadn't tried to hex him or hit him or bite him, which he hoped were all good indications. She just sat there, breathing raggedly, and looked at him – searched his face for something.

He was sure that he was supposed to say something, so he let forth the first thing that came into his mind. "That was me," he said. "I wanted to do that; I felt that. It didn't come from somewhere or someone else. I just... I just thought you should know that." And I can't believe I just did it, either, he thought, and he hoped he hadn't completely cocked up a friendship that meant more to him than he could ever find the words to express.

"W-what...?" she began.

He cut her off before she could reject him or offer the denial that was surely coming. "I don't know what we do next," he said nervously. "You know me, I'm not one to plan ahead."

She laughed but he thought it was too loud, too fast, probably forced. "I was going to ask what you were thinking, tossing your glasses like that," she said.

"There's an Unbreakable charm on them now, remember?" he returned quickly.

"Still, we should pick them up," she said, and then leaned over and gathered up his glasses by the bridge.

"Hermione, wait..." Harry started.

She thrust the dangling glasses into his hands. "It was nice, Harry... it was better than nice. It was also very... unexpected. All of this has been unexpected. I... I need to think."

Harry nodded; he tried to put on a good face. "I hope you're not angry with me," he said quietly.

"I'm feeling a lot of different things right now, but I'm not angry; I promise," she insisted. "I really need to think, that's all."

He consciously tried to pick up what she was feeling, and found himself utterly unable to do it. It seemed that there was no place to put his hands, and his stomach tossed and burned. "I... um... I guess

I should walk you back, then,” he forced himself to say, “unless you’d prefer... I mean, McGonagall might still be downstairs, and...”

“I’m not running; not from you, not from her. No one is running away,” Hermione said firmly.

He let her out of his rooms first, so that he could seal the wards behind them. He followed her down the first flight, but she slowed her pace until they were side by side. She reached out to him and took his right hand with her left without hesitation. When he gave a start she said, “I told you I’d hold your hand,” and he accepted the possibility that perhaps she didn’t think him a great prat and merely needed some time to consider what had happened.

McGonagall and Vector were still sitting in the public room with the witch Harry didn’t recognise. Hermione made no effort to let go of his hand, and McGonagall’s frigid expression made it perfectly clear that the professor had noticed. They walked out of Hogsmeade in silence, hand in hand, and Harry thought that the tension slowly faded as they strolled along the carriage path. As the castle drew into view, her hand slipped free.

Hermione cleared her throat. “About tomorrow, Harry... I’ll understand if you want me to –”

Harry stopped her before she could offer to stay behind. “I’m looking forward to tomorrow,” he said. “You couldn’t possibly pass on this – it might be a once-in-a-lifetime invitation. Besides, I think it’s an opportunity.”

Hermione looked at him curiously. “Of course it’s an opportunity, Harry. You might be able to significantly influence the goblins’ position on the war.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, it would be great if we manage something like that. I meant something else, though. You said you’re worried about being a distraction. Tomorrow, I can prove you wrong.”

Hermione laughed. "You think so, do you? You can start by being sure to read the book that the Headmaster and Doctor Covelli sent for us."

"What, you mean 'Living Amongst Us: The Goblin Subculture'? I finished that last evening," Harry said smugly.

Hermione's eyebrows lifted for a moment, but then she summoned a sly smile. "Fine, then – you can be sure that Ron's read it. That way, I won't have to badger him."

"I already promised him I'd fly with him at four," Harry pointed out.

"There's an entire evening after that," Hermione countered.

"I have a commitment later this evening," Harry said, hoping she wouldn't ask after it because he honestly couldn't tell her anything, "but I'll give him a nudge. You're not planning to make this simple, are you?"

Hermione said, "Nothing about us has ever been simple." She took his hand again, gave it a gentle squeeze before letting go, and continued toward the castle. Harry followed with the slightest hint of a spring in his step.

It had taken Harry a solid hour to regain his form on the Nimbus. He kept wanting to under-steer, and wrapping himself around a stick felt much less secure than planting himself on the Bonnie. It also had a tendency to dart, unlike his Firebolt. The Firebolt would always be important to him – he could see it as a mounted keepsake – but it had become as much a reminder of Umbridge and the loss of Quidditch as it was a remembrance of Sirius. The Bonnie was like the living embodiment of his godfather, really, and Harry had to admit to himself that his once-prized broom now took second place.

He wondered if his hour of poor steering and sloppy dives and sub-par acceleration would have been something closer to a quarter-hour if he hadn't kissed Hermione. Every few minutes, he reminded himself that she honestly didn't seem to be angry with him. In the other minutes, he admitted to himself that Hermione probably would

have hexed his hair off if she'd known what had happened on the beach in St. Ebb the week prior.

"Harry! Fetch the bloody Quaffle!" Ron snapped.

Harry blinked rapidly, just in time to see the Quaffle that they had been tossing; he turned hard – almost too hard – and managed to catch it in seconds.

"Where's your head today?" Ron called out. "Did you leave it in the library?"

"We didn't go to the library," Harry said quietly. He flipped the Quaffle in Ron's direction, and pulled into a shallow loop.

Ron scooped up the Quaffle, and set it drifting in Harry's direction. "You can't let her get to you," he advised Harry. "I've learned that the hard way, right? She'll dig and dig and dig and you have to say 'enough'! Set your line and play Keeper – that's what I say."

Harry caught the Quaffle and held it close. "Ron... what in the bloody hell are you talking about?"

Ron flushed. "Erm... thought you were having a row with Hermione. You have that look in your eyes; she must have said something horrid."

"She didn't do anything of the sort," Harry growled.

"Easy, mate!" Ron said. "I'm only saying that you have that look! Are you going to toss the Quaffle or not?" Harry gave the Quaffle a disgusted toss. Ron barely managed to field it; he frowned and descended toward the open equipment box at the edge of the pitch.

Harry pushed the Nimbus into something as close to a flat spin as it would allow, and only pulled out when he could make out blades of grass. He came to a stumbling stop a few feet from the stands, and let his broom fall to the ground.



“Merlin’s Beard! Do you want to visit the Hospital Wing?” Ron shouted as he ran across the pitch. As soon as he drew close enough to lower his voice, he added, “I think you’d better tell me what happened.”

Ron didn’t appear angry – he seemed more concerned – but Harry held back. “It’s nothing,” Harry said. “Look, let’s try again... oh.” He hadn’t noticed that the equipment box was latched shut.

Ron crossed his arms. “Harry, this is me – Ron... you know... fighting mountain trolls, playing with big bloody chess sets, hexing mad professors, getting dumped in the lake, dodging Death Eaters and, um, brain thingies... er... that Ron, remember?”

Harry tried to put him off. “Ron... I really don’t think that we should – ”

Ron was having none of it. “When you say ‘it’s nothing’, that means you’re not bleeding to death. You were fine earlier, so something happened. What did she do, then?”

“She didn’t do anything! Hermione didn’t do anything wrong,” Harry insisted.

Ron stared at Harry for a few moments; his jaw tightened and his ears reddened. “What did you do to her, then?”

Harry picked up his broom and began to walk away. “Drop it, Ron,” he warned.

Ron followed closely. “Right... now you’re scaring me,” he said. “You couldn’t have hurt her – you couldn’t have... Harry! Stop walking and tell me what this is all about!”

Harry turned on him and snarled, “I kissed her. There – are you satisfied?”

Ron just stood there, speechless, and Harry went on his way. He was nearly to the locker rooms before Ron caught him. “So what’s the problem?” Ron asked. “You kissed her, and...” He broke into a smirk. “First Cho Chang, now Hermione... you are a bad kisser, aren’t you?”

“Sod off, Ron!” Harry snapped. He quickly looked around; the stands appeared to be empty.

“I don’t see the problem here. You fancy her, she fancies you... wait a minute, I’m on to you.” Ron sighed. “This is about Heather.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Will you shut it? We’re in the open here!”

Ron drew himself up. “Look, if you think I’m going to stand by and let you play with Hermione while you’re still thinking – ”

“SHUT IT!” Harry shouted. He was positive that one of the locker room doors had moved.

“I’m not going to shut it!” Ron returned. “You’re my friend, but so is Hermione, and – ”

Harry let out a frustrated roar. He lunged at Ron; when Harry took his next step, he dumped Ron on the grass on the far side of the Forbidden Forest.

Ron rolled to his feet, panic-stricken. “What the bloody effin’ hell was THAT?”

“There was someone in the locker rooms!” Harry shouted back. “I’ll not have this spread all over Hogwarts – and what if Malfoy was in there? Hermione doesn’t need any more grief, and the Slytherins can’t know about Heather!”

“No! No! HOW DID WE GET HERE?” Ron shrieked.

Harry’s stomach churned, and he quickly offered, “Er... emergency portkey?”

“EMERGENCY PORTKEY? ARE YOU...?” It was as though someone fed Ron a Calming Draught. “Are you serious? I mean, I can understand why Dumbledore would do that for you... that’s wicked...”

Harry quickly piled on to the lie. "Now I have to ask him for another," he pretended to fume.

"Well, you shouldn't have wasted it on this!" Ron scolded. "I'm not blind – all you had to do was wave your hand toward the locker rooms, for Merlin's sake!"

"You wouldn't shut up!" Harry shot back.

Ron huffed, "Fine! Let's talk about... AAAHHHH!"

Harry instantly drew his wand. "What? What is it?"

Ron grabbed him by the shirt and madly shook him. "MY NIMBUS! YOUR NIMBUS! They're sitting there on the bloody ground, practically gift-wrapped! THEY'RE JUST SITTING THERE!" Harry gibbered at him and then began to laugh. Ron dramatically let go and huffed at him, and Harry's laughter only increased.

"That's enough of that!" Ron said sharply, and Harry wiped tears from his eyes as the laughter rolled on. "Put a cork in it, Potter!" Ron added, and Harry muffled his own mouth in a failed attempt to quiet himself.

"It's a broom," Harry choked out.

Ron looked at him as though he'd just said that magic didn't exist. "It's not just a broom, you ponce – it's a Nimbus 2100-R!" he whinged.

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It has an engraved nameplate and Devlin Whitehorn's personal message to you written on it," he pointed out, still chuckling. "Not very bright for someone to nick it, right?"

Ron harrumphed and set off at a brisk pace. "I'm fetching my broom," he growled.

"Ron, you don't even know where you are," Harry called after him.

Ron stopped. "Please tell me that you know," he said.

"This is the back side of the Forbidden Forest," Harry said. He glanced around, and envisioned the Hogwarts grounds and surrounding area in his mind. "Erm... it might be best to use the, um, Portkey to get back... er, it was supposed to leave us somewhere close to Hagrid's hut, not here."

Ron hesitated. "There's no other way? I'm not in a hurry to repeat that ride; that must be what Flooing is like for you..."

Harry shrugged. "Unless you want to walk round the whole of the Forest and past Hogsmeade, I'm out of ideas."

"Not a very accurate thing, was it?" Ron muttered. He looked at Harry intently, and added, "It's not a one-time sort of thing? Dumbledore gave you an unlimited Portkey?"

Harry decided to keep piling on. "Dunno... it's always supposed to take me to the same place, so I figured if we try it again... um... it's meant for one – maybe that threw it off?"

Ron licked his lips; he was clearly thinking over Harry's explanation. "I suppose that's possible... figuring that out would get into Arithmancy, I think, and that's best left to Hermione. You could ask Bill about it. He's probably made his share of Portkeys and what-not to get out of close scrapes. The thing is, if you're right and the two of us together threw it off, what's to say it doesn't leave us in the middle of the Forest the next time?"

Harry frowned; he certainly didn't have the time to walk back. "We still have plenty of light. I suspect it would take a few hours to walk back; that would leave us on the edge of the Forest at nightfall."

Ron grimaced. "Right, then – bloody Portkey it is. If we end up in there – " He jerked his thumb toward the thick trees. " – and we run across those... those spiders, I'll make certain they eat you first, I swear!"

"And to think you're my oldest friend," Harry muttered, and Ron sniggered. Harry reached out quickly in hopes that Ron would be

distracted. It worked; Ron flinched and squeezed his eyes shut. By the time he recovered, Harry had deposited the both of them unceremoniously next to Hagrid's pumpkin patch.

Ron rolled over, breathing hard, and for a moment it seemed that he might spew; "Next time, Harry, just stun me and be done with it," he groaned. Harry followed as Ron stumbled to his feet and began to pick his way toward the Quidditch pitch. He wondered if popping with someone was like forced Apparation; one of his readings at Grimmauld Place had mentioned something about forced Apparation causing nausea and headaches and sometimes worse. I'll have to ask Dobby about this before I try it again, he quickly decided; it wasn't hard to imagine that he and Ron – or he and Hermione, or all three of them for that matter – might have to rely on popping for a quick escape.

For most of the hike back to the pitch, Ron seemed resigned to mumbling about misplaced brooms and portkeys and other grievances. For his part, Harry was quietly thrilled – Hermione wasn't mentioned once. The two Nimbus racers lay in the same place where they had been left.

Ron held his broom out and sighted down its length. "You don't suppose they're hexed, do you?" he asked. "After all, you thought you saw someone, and they were just laying here..."

Harry gave his own broom a visual once-over without touching it. "Detheridge has been covering detection; we went over a few charms for finding hexes..." He recalled the various incantations and methodically checked each broom, but found nothing. "They're free of the basic sort, at least," he concluded, and slung the broom over his shoulder.

Ron followed suit; then he cleared his throat in a noisy way that for a moment made Harry think of Ron's brother Percy. "I can't let it go, you know," he said. "I won't let you mess about with Hermione."

Harry gave a start; he whipped out his wand and immediately built a silent space around the two of them. "I'm not messing about; she knows about Heather," he told Ron.

Ron's eyes saucered. "Are you mad? This is why you're acting like the kneazle died, right? What did she do, then? Did she sock you like Malfoy, or did she cast pruritis aegrius on your bits?"

"No! Hermione's not like that!" Harry insisted. "I didn't say anything; she remembered what you said in the Room of Requirement."

"What did I say? Oh... I did mention Heather, didn't I?" Ron said sheepishly.

"Now if she knew that I'd kissed Heather as well, then she probably would have cursed me halfway to Hogsmeade," Harry admitted.

Ron flushed instantly. "You... you are two-timing! Bloody hell, Harry – I won't have it, not with Hermione! What's gotten into you?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "Oh, that's rich coming from you, Ron," he snapped.

"It's completely different!" Ron bit back. "Nobody expects anything from me, and I don't expect anything in return – it's all in fun. Nothing's gone any further than your basic snog – well, except Lavender, and we... er... have an understanding, I guess you'd call it. See, it's completely different – no one's being hurt."

"How does Luna figure into that?" Harry asked angrily.

"That was your fault – you and Heather and whatever the two of you did to everyone in that club. Look... Luna's not like I thought she was. She's a lot smarter than I knew, for a start, and she's got a sense of humour under all that... um... under the dotty stuff, right?" Ron's easy smile dropped a bit, and he added, "It's like with Hermione, I suppose; Luna can do better than me."

Harry couldn't believe that Ron could say that about himself with a straight face. "Don't even think that, mate," he insisted.

Ron looked Harry dead in the eyes. His smile had returned but there was something cold and hard behind it, and Harry didn't care for that

at all. "They want something that they can't get from me," Ron said. "I'm not out to buy jewelry for a girl; I'm not shopping for dress robes, see? Come on, Harry, you've known Hermione as long as I have – she doesn't do things in halves. I don't think Luna's any different that way, now that I've gotten to know her a bit. I could ask Brocklehurst to Hogsmeade and there'd be no worries. I'm considering it, actually."

Harry just wanted to be done talking about Hermione; he suspected that he was in for more than his share of it later that evening. "What's your point?" he asked.

Ron rolled his eyes. "You – kissed – Hermione! What do you suppose she's thinking right now? She's probably in the Library, looking through some old scroll on relationships!"

Harry cringed at the thought; he realised that there was a very good chance that Hermione was obsessing about what had happened. "I didn't mean to kiss Heather," he said. "I wanted to kiss Hermione, and I don't know what to do about it."

Ron shrugged. "It's your mess, mate – enjoy it." He broke into a smirk. "Now if you need Heather to go somewhere else, I'm sure I could help you with that."

Harry smacked Ron on the arm. "You're impossible!" he groaned.

Ron closed his eyes and summoned a fatuous grin. "Come on, Harry, don't tell me you couldn't watch her walk in that bloody skirt all day long! How do they accomplish anything, anyhow? Skin everywhere... I'd need an extra set of eyes if I were a Muggle."

"Ron!" Harry snapped.

Ron opened his eyes again; he was back to the easy smile and the cold eyes. "Heather told me what she's looking for, when we were on the beach. We're looking for the same thing, Heather and me."

"And what would that be?" Harry asked; he couldn't keep the irritation from his voice.

“We just want to feel good,” Ron said seriously. “We’re thinking about today, see? Not next year – now.”

“Ron...” Harry began.

Ron waved him off. “Just don’t hurt Hermione – don’t you dare. If you hurt her, I... I don’t know what I’ll do, but it’ll be horrible!”

The feelings that Ron gave off were so conflicted that Harry’s head began to throb. He closed his eyes and tried to work through one of Covelli’s exercises.

“Did you hear what I said?” Ron shouted.

Harry nodded, his eyes still closed. “I heard you, Ron. You won’t need to do anything horrible,” he said calmly.

“Er... right, then...” Ron said; he sounded confused, and Harry held back a grin.

Harry slowly opened his eyes; the throbbing was gone. He glanced at his watch and frowned. “I have to go,” he said. “Next time we fly, I’ll bring my best game – I promise.”

“You want to do it again?” Ron asked hopefully. “I was sort of wondering if some of the problem was, um, that you didn’t want to be here.”

“ ‘Course I do!” Harry insisted.

Ron smiled again, and this time it seemed to reach his eyes. “You’d better bring your game, all right! Maybe, er, you’d scrimmage with the team?”

Harry thought for a moment. “I’d have to ask McGonagall about that,” he said. “It might be against the rules.”

“I’ll have a go at the Rulebook,” Ron said excitedly. “It’ll be brilliant!”



Harry smiled at his friend. If scrimmaging would make him happy, then Harry would scrimmage – assuming that Gryffindor wouldn't be penalised as a result. He let the silent space fall; Ron gave a hearty wave and headed for the castle. Harry stayed behind until Ron passed from view. With wand at the ready, he checked the locker rooms. He found no one there, nor was anyone hiding beneath the adjacent stands. He re-entered the nearest locker room door and then popped to the rear of the Three Broomsticks.

Madam Rosmerta nodded at him as he entered and gave a slight shrug toward the door to the private room. Harry knocked on the closed door. The knob turned, and Ted Tonks waved him in.

"Good evening, Harry. Everything is in place," Mr. Tonks said.

Dumbledore rose from a squashy armchair that he had no doubt conjured for himself. He held out a knapsack. "Everything is inside," he said.

"Engorgio on each item, and then cancel the feather-light spells?" Harry asked. Dumbledore nodded.

"Are you carrying your passport?" Mr. Tonks asked.

"No... I hadn't thought of that," Harry admitted. "It's upstairs."

"Fetch it, then," Mr. Tonks said. "I have some local currency for you, in the event you might have need for it." Harry casually left the private room, climbed the stairs, pocketed the passport that identified him as James Black as well as the shrunken Bonnie, and then returned. Dumbledore motioned to the two people seated before the hearth. They were completely cloaked and hadn't said a word. Harry was glad for that; he hadn't summoned the courage required to look them in the eye, not yet.

The Headmaster said, "Fawkes has agreed to provide transportation to and from the location. He will return for you two hours after you arrive." There was a fiery flash in the corner of the room. Fawkes flew to Dumbledore's shoulder and sang two brief notes. Though he couldn't see the faces of Dumbledore's cloaked companions, their

postures seemed to relax and Harry was glad for that. Dumbledore gave a slight nod to Fawkes, and the phoenix left the Headmaster's shoulder and alighted on Harry's with a single flap of his wings.

"We certainly wouldn't want anyone falling by the wayside," Dumbledore said. He withdrew a great length of brightly coloured rope from within his robes, which he wrapped around Harry's waist and then tightly knotted; he then repeated the wrapping and knotting around the waists of the two persons in cloaks.

Fawkes rose into the air and slowly lowered his tail. "Think clearly of your destination, Harry," Dumbledore instructed. Harry fixed the image in his mind and then grasped Fawkes' tail. There was a rush of motion and two loud shrieks behind him, and then he found himself in the clearing that he had envisioned. He released Fawkes' tail; the phoenix flew clear of him, sang briefly and then disappeared.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger lowered the hoods of their cloaks. "Someone... might have... warned us..." Mrs. Granger gasped.

Mr. Granger laughed nervously. "Would it have mattered?"

Harry raised a hand. "Please... stay quiet until we're on the property," he whispered. Mrs. Granger's eyes flitted from one tree to the next and she quickly nodded. Mr. Granger just looked at him, and Harry looked away as quickly as he could. He walked to the edge of the clearing and gave a series of complex waves with his wand; there was a ripple of something, and then stillness. "Come on," he whispered. As soon as all three of them were within the cover of the trees, Harry repeated the sequence of waves and once again felt the ripple. The wards were in place, and he could breathe a bit easier.

"We should be all right now," Harry said. "Hopefully no one was lurking about."

Mrs. Granger slowed to a crawl almost as soon as they began making their way along the walk through the gardens. For a time, Harry feared she would stop at every rosebush and every different sort of flower; she lingered before a bed of monkshood. Mr. Granger's

eyes were chiefly fixed on the house – Harry supposed it was properly called a manor.

“What is this place?” Mr. Granger quietly asked.

“It belonged to my grandmother's family,” Harry returned.

Mr. Granger squinted in the direction of the sun. “It’s late morning here,” he murmured.

Mrs. Granger marvelled at a large topiary. “If our stay here is supposed to be a secret, I have to ask, Harry – how is all of this maintained?” she asked.

Harry hesitated, as he had a vague sense that Mrs. Granger would be as unyielding as Hermione when she heard his answer. “We really should make our way inside,” he said at last.

The entry doors were massive and sat beneath a portico. Harry tapped the brass doorknocker lightly, which yielded a rumble that brought to mind Hagrid seeking entry. The right-side door opened slowly.

Dobby emerged, dressed in the patchwork tuxedo that Winky had made him for the reading of Sirius’ will. “Harry Potter, sir!” he squeaked excitedly.

Harry greeted him as a friend, for he was exactly that. “Dobby,” Harry said, “I’d like for you to meet – ”

Dobby burst forward and eager shook Mr. Granger’s hand and then did the same to Mrs. Granger, as he burred, “You are the parents of Miss Granger! Dobby is so happy to be seeing you! Dobby is welcoming you to Henshawe Manor!” They handled quite well the spectacle of a three-foot-tall long-eared pointy-faced creature wringing their hands; Harry tried to imagine Uncle Vernon or even Aunt Petunia in the same circumstance but couldn’t manage it.

“To... where?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“To Henshawe Manor, Mistress Granger,” Dobby repeated. “Brucewood is the name of this place where Harry Potter has brought you and where we will tend to your needs.”

Mrs. Granger looked to Dobby and then to the gardens and then back to the grinning house-elf. “You care for the house and the gardens, Dobby?” she asked. “We’ll have to see about that.”

“Mistress Granger need not lift a finger, if Dobby can help it,” Dobby assured her; “The manor is ready for you, Harry Potter,” he then announced proudly and ushered them inside.

Both of the Grangers gaped at the sheer size of the entry hall. “Harry... this is too...” Mrs. Granger began. “Generous,” Mr. Granger finished.

Harry waved them off. “It’s sat empty for thirty years – that’s what I was told,” he said.

The four corners of the hall were fitted with large planters, filled with plants that flowered in brilliant reds and golds. “I think I recognise the gold ones,” Harry thought aloud, “but I’m not sure about the red ones.”

“Lychnis and solidago, Harry Potter sir,” squeaked a tiny voice from the shadows. “Dobby said that the colours suited Harry Potter sir’s manor.”

“I wondered where you were, Winky,” Harry said. “Come and meet the Grangers, would you?”

While Dobby was all motion and energy, Winky was slow and tentative. She fretted with the hem of her dress as she crossed the hall. “Winky will serve Harry Potter sir by serving the not-wizards as best she can,” Winky said softly.

Mrs. Granger knelt down, which left her a few inches taller than Winky and drove the house-elf’s eyes into saucers. “Will you show me the gardens later?” she asked. “They’re quite remarkable. I can’t imagine how you would have restored them after such a long time.

Did you select the plants to be included?" She continued to fire away questions and Harry couldn't help but see Hermione in her mother, bristling at the idea of being served and thirsting for knowledge.

When the questions tapered off a bit, the house-elf said to Mrs. Granger, "Winky does not know your given name, so Winky does not know how to address you."

Mrs. Granger smiled. "My name is Cordelia." She gestured to Mr. Granger, and added, "My husband's name is Thomas."

Winky nodded; she still absently toyed with her dress. "Winky will show you whatever you wish, Cordelia Granger," she said.

Dobby tapped his foot angrily. "This is Master Granger and Mistress Granger," he insisted.

Winky hissed at him, then said forcefully, "If Harry Potter sir is Harry Potter sir and not Master Harry or Master Potter, then this is Cordelia Granger and Thomas Granger sir, or Madam Cordelia and Mister Thomas." Dobby glared at her, but said nothing.

"Simply Cordelia would be fine, Winky," Mrs. Granger interjected.

Winky noticeably stiffened, and cast her eyes downward. "Winky did not mean to presume," she whispered.

"Our daughter has told us that your people are enslaved," Mrs. Granger said kindly. "In our world – in the world of Muggles – slavery has been a crime for many years. We've certainly never kept slaves and we've never hired servants. I don't know what you expect from us, but we're likely to treat you as fellow guests even if you do provide services."

"Hired servants wouldn't be the worst thing in the world..." Mr. Granger said under his breath.

Mrs. Granger's head snapped around. "Thomas!"

Mr. Granger held up his hands. "I'm just saying – that's all!"

“You certainly won’t be treated as though you were slaves,” Mrs. Granger finished in a huff. Dobby had a glint of understanding and a few unshed tears in his eyes; Winky appeared bewildered.

Harry shuffled his feet. “Well, then... I have to set a few things in place, and then we should cast the charm as soon as possible,” he said. Watching the Grangers made him think of Hermione, and he didn’t want to do that – he wasn’t going to think of her, especially when she wasn’t even there. She believed that she was a distraction, and he wasn’t going to let her be right about it.

Dumbledore had helped him pack a kit for the casting of the charm and the marking of the supporting runes. Harry went into the study just off the entry hall and spread out the pack atop a bare desk. Because Brucewood had blood wards, he had to wet the stick ink with drops of his own blood before mixing in the water and adding the fixing oils. Once the runic ink was mixed he took the inkbottle and quill, returned to the entry doors, and began to inscribe the proper runes on the doors. Dumbledore had prepared a card that showed Harry exactly what to inscribe; after every few runes, Harry stopped to check his work against the card. He could feel Mr. Granger watching him from behind, but he shunted the feeling aside and concentrated on his work.

Once the entry doors were completed, he made his way to the interior of the house, to the safe room that he had picked out. Again, he inscribed the door, and then added inscriptions to the doorframe. He knew that Mr. Granger had followed and was still observing, but ignored it. Harry couldn’t stand inside the room without imagining Dobby making some sort of last stand against a pack of Death Eaters intent on getting at Hermione’s parents. The thought made him flush with heat; he quickly left the room as soon as his quill drew the last rune.

He climbed the stairs until he reached the small tower atop the vault of the manor’s great hall. The floor inside the tower was opened at the centre; it exposed the top of the keystone to the central support arch. The stone was covered with evidence of runes – there were faint traces of ink here and there. Dumbledore had explained that the

property's wards would radiate from the keystone – they were far more complex than both the warding on the bothy and the warding that he had placed on his rooms in Hogsmeade. Harry carefully wrote the protective runes associated with the Fidelius charm across the curve of the keystone. Dumbledore believed that this would shape the result of the charm like a bubble over the entire property, and had presented evidence from various tomes and scrolls to support his belief. Harry hoped that he was right.

When Harry returned – with Mr. Granger close behind – he found Mrs. Granger reading the spines of the books in the study. She turned and asked, “Is it time?”

Harry nodded. He made his way to Dumbledore's kit, and tucked away the quill and the inkbottle and the card. There were two envelopes inside; Harry was sure he hadn't seen them there before. One was marked “For the Grangers”. The other said “Read Me”; the gold ink suddenly twinkled at Harry as he touched the envelope, and he let out a soft snort. He handed the first envelope to Mr. Granger, and opened the second himself.

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Dear Harry,

There is no doubt that you have inscribed the necessary runes in exactly the fashion that I have described and depicted for you. I have not entered into your mind, but you remain unaware of the potency with which you on occasion project your emotions. Thusly, it is important that we dispense with the balance of your doubts.

Firstly, you possess far more than the necessary power to cast the charm.

Secondly, you possess in ample measure the necessary disposition. I have no doubt that you care for all three of the Grangers, and the depth of your care for the youngest Granger strengthens your bond with the elders.

Thirdly, Voldemort will be unable to penetrate the protections of the charm; it is truly safe for you to be the caster. Once you cast it, the charm may only be circumvented by accident or by your own willingness to allow it to fail. I know you will be unwilling to do so until such time as it is safe.

Finally, some flotsam from an old man's mind –

There can be no active secrets between yourself and the Grangers at the time you cast the charm. Secrets will prey upon you; they will obstruct trust and may obstruct the casting. Unburden yourself if necessary. When you do cast the charm, allow your magic to flow freely. You may feel strange or even uncomfortable during the casting; this is to be expected, and you should pay it no mind.

I am already rather fiercely proud of you, and I shall be made even more proud when you return after succeeding in this important – nay, sacred – task.

Fondly,

Albus Dumbledore

- - - - -

Harry re-read the last bit once, and finished just as the parchment fell to dust in his hands. He looked to the envelope; the paper faded away, leaving the golden words “Read Me” floating just above the desk top for a moment. The second “e” winked at him, then spun and fizzed like a Catherine wheel and disappeared with a loud pop.

What's an ‘active secret’? he wondered. Was withholding something the same as keeping a secret? Did he have to tell the Grangers everything about himself? There was only one thing that seemed a bit like a secret, in that the Grangers were quite possibly the last people on Earth who he intended to tell about it.

Mr. Granger had passed the other letter to Mrs. Granger, and it too fell to dust. The Grangers shared an anxious look before Mr. Granger blurted out, “I’m glad you killed them!” Mrs. Granger’s eyebrows shot



up even as Mr. Granger let out a sigh of relief and added, "I've wanted to say that for a month. They tried to kill us all, and I'm bloody well glad that they're dead."

Harry shuddered; sometimes he felt as if he would find the Grangers' dining room through the next door, and it was one of those times just then. His chest tightened. "I didn't have to kill them; it wasn't right," he said with difficulty. "I can still see it, all the blood... I could have left them for the Aurors, but after what they..." He couldn't manage to say any more.

"I wish you hadn't been the one to do it, Harry," Mr. Granger said. "This shouldn't fall to children – I'm sorry, but you're sixteen years old! It shouldn't fall to you and H-Hermione and the Weasley children and the others – it's not right!" His jaw tightened as he fell silent.

Mrs. Granger went on, "We're doing this because Hermione can't afford to be distracted, not when she's likely to be at the centre of things. She asked this of us, and we're doing it, but we'd hold her here if it was possible."

"I tried," Harry said quietly. "Just today, I told her everyone would understand if she needed to be with you. I tried, honestly – she wouldn't hear of it."

Mrs. Granger gently elbowed her husband. "I think that something else needs to be said, don't you?" She mouthed the word 'wine' so clearly that Harry couldn't possibly mistake it.

Mr. Granger gave a small frown. "Harry... I shouldn't have filled your glass more than once, and I was certainly not on my best behaviour when you joined us. I apologise for, um, getting you soused."

"I was in a bad way the next morning, but nothing awful happened," Harry allowed. "I don't think an apology is needed..." Mrs. Granger rolled her eyes, and Harry added, "... but consider it accepted."

Mr. Granger slowly let out a long breath. "It's good to have all that in the clear," he said. "The old man was right about that, at least."

Harry didn't realise that he was fidgeting until after he'd begun. "Well, then..." he said.

The Grangers shared another look. Mrs. Granger asked, "Is there something you need to tell us?"

Harry tugged at his collar. "Erm... just one thing, I suppose... um... small thing, really..."

"You've gone pale... surely it can't be that bad?" Mrs. Granger offered hesitantly. For his part, Mr. Granger appeared to be bracing for horrid news.

Harry squeaked, "It's just... um... ikissedhermione."

Mrs. Granger crooked an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, what was that?" Mr. Granger's mouth twitched oddly and Mrs. Granger covered the lower part of her face with her hands.

Harry winced as he said more clearly, "I kissed Hermione."

"You kissed my daughter," Mr. Granger confirmed. Harry nodded, and Mr. Granger's mouth quirked into a grin.

Mrs. Granger let her hands drop. "You've gone pale over that?" she laughed.

"Yes!" Harry said defensively. "She wasn't expecting it and I think I've upset her, and if I've gone and fouled five years' worth of... what's so funny?" Mrs. Granger let out a snort and Harry bit back a growl.

Mr. Granger tried to summon a serious expression but couldn't seem to manage it, which only raised Harry closer to a boil. He said, "Don't mistake this for encouragement, not exactly. Frankly, I'd prefer that Hermione seek out a religious community... you know, we could have taken her to that priory in Begbroke..."

Mrs. Granger snorted again. "Oh, that would have been brilliant! The prioress wouldn't have survived the first ten seconds with her... honestly, Thomas."

Mr. Granger laughed, and then said, "The fact of the matter is that Cordelia and me... well, we both assumed that at the very least a fair bit of kissing went on at that house in London. Given that you're showing signs of imminent cardiac arrest, I'd say we were well off the mark!" Mrs. Granger began to laugh, and covered her mouth again.

"It's not funny – not at all," Harry said flatly.

"It's a bloody relief!" Mr. Granger said jovially. "I had something a lot more involved than kissing fixed in my head when you started to panic, let me tell you!"

Harry's eyebrows nearly shot off his forehead. "We would never... she would never... that's not it at all!"

Mr. Granger clapped him on the shoulder. "My daughter's boyfriend is afraid he'll push her too far with just kissing and will literally kill to protect her. I'm having a difficult time finding fault, Harry. I am having one hell of a time getting the word 'boyfriend' out of my mouth, but I think righteous anger's out of the question here – "

Harry finally managed to cut him off. "I'm not Hermione's boyfriend."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger traded another look. "I see," Mrs. Granger said. "Of course, Harry," Mr. Granger added. Harry let a growl free.

Mr. Granger held up his hands in surrender. "We're done stirring you up," he promised.

Harry calmed himself and struggled to find the right words. "Hermione's very important to me – that goes without saying, right? I'll do my best to keep her safe – this much I can promise you."

"We know that, Harry," Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione's parents were both smiling at him; part of Harry figured they should be flushing purple and frothing at him like Uncle Vernon, simply for putting their daughter in danger. Hermione was lucky enough to have two parents, both of whom obviously cared for her,

but Harry wasn't jealous or envious – he was just happy that she had what he didn't.

"I've lost my parents and I can't get them back," Harry said. "That isn't going to happen to Hermione, not as long as I can help it." A draft ran through the study and stirred his hair, and it occurred to him that he could feel magic flowing around him. Mrs. Granger's eyes were filled with unshed tears. Harry raised his wand, waved it as he had been shown, and said, "Fidelius."

The draft turned into a gale, and the room around them shimmered in a white light. Harry blinked against the light and struggled to hold his ground. He blinked again, and swore that the house was slowly disappearing. The light receded, and the house was gone, the land was gone – he and the Grangers and Dobby and Winky seemed to be standing there in nothingness. A dull clanging came, as much felt as heard; first the grounds reappeared, and then the manor around them. When the clanging stopped, books and papers fell throughout the study. Thankfully, the Grangers were spared somehow from the falling debris; a tome entitled *Historical Lineages in the English-Speaking Wizarding World* landed on Harry's head.

His next clear awareness was of Mrs. Granger sitting on an armchair beside him; he was on a sofa in a room that he didn't recall. I really have to apologise to Shackbolt, he thought as he tried to move and was rewarded with a crushing headache. He shook it off and glanced at his watch.

"Are you all right, Harry? Do you know where you are?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Very near to the Pacific Ocean," Harry said thickly.

Mrs. Granger's brow furrowed. "Harry...?"

Harry slowly sat up. "We're in British Columbia, Mrs. Granger. You're on the western side of a very large island, and Fawkes is coming for me in... half an hour." He tested his footing and, finding it adequate, made his way down a corridor to a staircase and into the entry hall.

Dobby and Winky had already begun the process of enlarging the Grangers' belongings; the hall was lined with trunks and crates of all sizes. Harry spirited Dobby into a side room, where Dobby happily performed some sort of elvin magic that relieved Harry's headache in moments.

"Dobby, are you clear on all the contingency plans?" Harry asked.

The house-elf nodded furiously. "If the charm falls, Dobby will pop Master Granger and Mistress Granger to one of the other locations and Winky will come to Harry Potter. If Dobby and Winky are prevented from popping, Dobby will lead Master Granger and Mistress Granger to the safe room and Winky will fight."

"Did you say Winky will fight?" Harry confirmed.

"Winky understands that Master Granger and Mistress Granger are family to Harry Potter," Dobby said. "Dobby and Winky are both ready to follow Harry Potter's command; Dobby and Winky will... we will kill if we must. Dobby knows that Winky can be vicious, so Winky will fight first; Dobby will fight if Dobby must."

"Dobby, you are my friend," Harry said earnestly. "Winky is my friend, too. I want you to protect the Grangers, but I don't want either of you to do anything foolish. I want you both to get out of here along with the Grangers, unless it's impossible. Do you understand?"

Dobby sniffed twice, then reached inside his patchwork tuxedo and drew out a handkerchief. He blew his nose loudly and dramatically; it sounded like the horn on Dudley's old bicycle, Harry thought. As Dobby tucked the handkerchief away, Harry spotted a blue monogram on it – A.B.W.P.D.

"How did you get that handkerchief?" Harry laughed.

"Headmaster Dumbledore gave it to Dobby when Dobby left Hogwarts," Dobby squeaked. "He wasn't needing to give Dobby clothes, since Dobby was hired. Dobby thinks it was one of Headmaster Dumbledore's little jokes, but Dobby kept it just the same."

Harry moved to leave, but Dobby flung himself around Harry's legs. "Dobby is Harry Potter's friend," he cried. "Dobby is the luckiest elf!"

Harry managed to tug Dobby free. He lowered himself to his knees and moved to shake hands; he wanted to look Dobby in the eyes as Mrs. Granger had done with Winky. Instead he found himself gripped in a surprisingly powerful hug.

"Dobby will not fail Harry Potter," the house elf said fiercely.

"I know," Harry said. "Thank you." Dobby was still twittering about being thanked by Harry Potter as Harry made his way to bid farewell to the Grangers. He left them one last thing – a wrapped package about the size of a shoebox. He told them it was from Dumbledore. He left to meet Fawkes before they could open it.

## Chapter Thirty-five

### THRILL OF THE HUNT

September 15, 1996

"It's not that bad," Harry told Ron. His shirt fit closely, but Harry was still growing accustomed to clothing in his own size. With the waistcoat and vest added, he felt more encumbered than he would have liked.

"It's that bad, all right!" Ron moaned. "What are these things, trousers or pants?"

"I think Dumbledore called them breeches," Harry said.

"Do you want to hear what I call them?" Ron fumed.

"I'll take a pass," Harry laughed.

Ron's voice went shrill. "They're having us on, you know – the goblins are going to have a right laugh over us!" Harry just shook his head. "You're telling me that they actually dress like this?" Ron went on.

"Someone's never opened his eyes at Gringotts," Hermione said from behind them. Harry stood up quickly from the Common Room sofa. He smoothed his hair, but stopped as soon as he gave it a thought – it was futile, he knew.

"At least you're only wearing a smart version of what the goblins wear to work," Hermione went on. She wore a long dark dress with a lace collar. It looked heavy and it was exceptionally full.

"Would a cooling charm help?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled broadly. "That would be brilliant, Harry!" she said. He quickly obliged.

Ginny came stumbling down from the girls' dormitory; a pair of third-year girls gave her as wide a berth as they could manage. She had the look of someone experiencing the morning after the night before, and Ron began to glare well before she reached the base of the stairs. She walked past Hermione, then Ron and then Harry without any more acknowledgement than a rude grunt, and then stopped dead just beyond Harry. "What in the bloody hell are you wearing?" she croaked.

"Language, Ginny!" Hermione protested.

"What were you doing last night?" Ron demanded in return; Hermione gave Ron a solid thwack on the arm.

"Working on a special project for Professor Flitwick, as if you care," Ginny snapped back.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron fired off.

Harry cut in. "We're off to meet with the goblins," he reminded Ginny.

"Ah, the goblins," Ginny muttered. She squinted in the direction of Harry's neck; Harry took a half-step back. "Your ascot... it's completely wrong," she said.

"My... what?" Harry said.

"Ascot... ascot," Ginny said impatiently. "You don't know what's wrapped around your neck?"

Hermione gave Ron an appraising look. "Ginny's right," she agreed. "Here, let me help you with it." Ron gurgled as Hermione twisted his ascot tight.

"Neville had one with his robes for the Yule Ball. He couldn't manage it either," Ginny said.

Ginny had her troubles with the ascot, as well; she was on her second try when Harry cleared his throat and asked, "Do you remember what we spoke about at the Lovegoods?"



Ginny's hand twitched and the ascot came loose again. "How could I forget?" she said quietly.

"It wasn't you," Harry told her. "I'm sure of it."

Ginny started again with trembling hands. "You're sure I didn't let the dream happen? How can you be sure of it?" she asked.

"A lot has happened in the last month," Harry said. "I can't explain, but it wasn't you. I, er, just thought you should know."

Ginny pulled harder on the ascot than was necessary; Harry stumbled forward. "You can't explain, or you won't explain?" she asked coldly.

Harry frowned. "I thought you should know; it's one less thing to worry about."

"I'll be worried about it until Voldemort's dead and gone," Ginny said. "I'll probably be worried about it for the rest of my life." Harry looked around the Common Room to see if anyone else was within earshot; Ginny pulled hard on the ascot, and Harry faced her again.

"It was me, Ginny," Harry said. "I know it was me."

Ginny pursed her lips, and finished spreading the sides of the fabric. She undid the top button of his shirt and carefully tucked the ascot into place. "Do you have a pin?" she asked.

Harry was confused. "A pin?"

"A stick pin – do you have one?" Ginny repeated. "It's to keep the ends in place."

He looked at her blankly. "No... should I?"

"It's always good when you can pin things down," she said absently. She smoothed the ends by moving her hands against his chest and she took her time doing it. He began to feel distinctly uncomfortable,

and he was painfully aware that Ron and Hermione were both watching.

“What’s this about?” he whispered forcefully.

Ginny let her hands drop. Her tone was curious, and he couldn’t figure what she was feeling. “Thank you for letting me know, Harry,” she said. “I was getting tired of hiding myself away, you know – always making sure to stay clear of you.”

“Erm... either McGonagall or Dumbledore will be coming for us,” Harry said quickly. “I don’t think you want to be seen...”

Ginny ran her hands through her hair. “That bad, eh? I suppose the Great Hall’s out, then...”

“I could call for a house-elf –” Harry murmured. With a high-pitched pop, a house-elf appeared no more than a foot from him; he was so startled that he nearly fell.

“Esteemed apprentice Master Harry sir!” the house-elf squeaked. “Why do you call for a lowly house-elf in the presence of... of... students? We is not to be seen, Master Harry sir! We is... eek! She-Who-Knits!”

Hermione buried her face in her hands, and Ron’s eyes widened before he started to laugh. ““She-Who-Knits’?” he chortled. “Oh, that’s rich!”

“Hermione... I... I’m so sorry...” Ginny giggled.

“Good morning, Spat,” Harry said angrily. “I don’t appreciate having my friend’s feelings hurt.”

Spat quickly ducked his head. “Spat was impertinent,” he said quickly. “Spat apologises to Master Harry Potter sir.”

“You’ve hurt Hermione, not me,” Harry snapped. “If you’re going to make your apologies, then you speak to her.”

Spat fidgeted nearly to the point of trembling. “We is not to be seen and we is not to speak, Master Harry Potter sir! You are the Headmaster’s esteemed apprentice so we speaks to you, and we speaks to the professors!”

“Harry, please stop,” Hermione said softly. Spat stared at her for a long moment, and then returned his eyes to the floor. She walked toward the house-elf, who nearly convulsed as a result.

“No hats, Miss...” Spat cried.

“No more hats, I promise you,” Hermione told him.

“She... the Miss is having Spat on,” Spat said nervously.

“I never meant to hurt any of you!” Hermione assured him. “I don’t believe that any of you should be enslaved – it’s plainly wrong – but it’s clear I went about things badly. I’m truly sorry.”

Spat gasped. “The Miss mustn’t apologise to Spat! The Miss acts like Master Harry Potter sir, and Master Harry sir shouldn’t act as Master Harry sir does!”

“If I caused you pain, Spat, then I should apologise,” Hermione insisted. “Again, I’m so sorry.”

The sound of a clearing throat at the portrait hole drew everyone’s attention. “Pardon, but am I to understand that the elves refer to one of my students as ‘She-Who-Knits’?” Dumbledore asked.

Spat threw himself to the floor. “H-H-Headmaster s-sir... Sp-Sp-Spat f-followed the will of t-the –”

“I am disappointed,” Dumbledore said, and Spat responded as though he’d been struck. “I shall speak with the Taimmainen this afternoon. In the meantime, please refrain from using that name; it is derogatory.” He turned to Hermione. “And as for you, Miss Granger... I take it that this is in reference to your penchant for knitting elf-sized headwear?”

Hermione blushed fiercely. “Yes, Headmaster. I’ve not done it this year, I swear.”

“You are a curious sort of rebel,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes. “I trust that you will be more diplomatic in your efforts today?”

“Of course, Headmaster!” Hermione said immediately.

Dumbledore looked at his curious watch from several angles. “Minister Fudge has somehow become aware of your pending visit with Fliptrask and his colleagues. He is most anxious to meet with the three of you before you depart,” he said. “That is why I am ten minutes late in arriving here –”

A terrified squeak came from the stairs to the boys’ dormitories. Two young students were plastered against the railing; their shock at seeing the Headmaster in their Common Room was evident to all.

Dumbledore gave a friendly wave, and began again, “That is why I am ten minutes late in arriving here, which will in turn require that you make your way to the waiting carriage immediately. A pity, wouldn’t you agree?” Ron appeared lost until after Harry and Hermione both smirked.

The Headmaster turned to Ginny and said, “Miss Weasley, you look a fright. Might I suggest that a lie-in is in order? Young elf, please fetch some light breakfast and take it to Miss Weasley in the fifth-year dormitory... some of Professor Detheridge’s coffee appears in order, as well. Go on – off with you both!” Spat disappeared and Ginny trundled toward the stairs with her head ducked. Harry, Hermione and Ron followed Dumbledore through the portrait hole and toward a small staircase that none of the three students could recall ever seeing before.

The small staircase wound endlessly downward. Just when Harry suspected that they were nearing the centre of the earth, Dumbledore opened a partially concealed door that opened into the corridor that led to the first floor classrooms. Harry looked to his left; Fudge, Percy Weasley and a knot of Aurors waited at the base of the main stairs in

the entry hall. Before Ron could turn, Harry nudged him after Dumbledore. They exited into the courtyard and moved briskly down the walk and then along a path until they reached a waiting Thestral-drawn carriage.

"This is where I take my leave," Dumbledore said. "Unlike Cornelius, I have every confidence in the three of you."

"Er... we won't do anything daft, Headmaster," Ron offered.

Dumbledore gave a soft chuckle; "Provided that you avoid apocalyptic errors, all shall be fine in the end," he returned. He held out his hand to Hermione and ushered her into the carriage, then stepped aside for Ron and Harry to join her.

Harry was surprised to see Fliptrask awaiting them in the carriage. He seemed to flow across the bench, his corpulent belly sagging against his legs. The goblin's dress was similar to Harry's, but more adorned – a splash of gold here; encrusted jewels there. "Greetings," he rumbled. "My presence here should be an indication to you of the importance of this event – both the hunt itself and the fact that we are allowing you to see it. Consider yourselves unduly privileged." He roughly extended a hand to Ron. "You are Mister Potter's guest. What are you called?"

"Ron Weasley, sir," Ron squeaked. "Erm... I didn't catch your... um... name?"

"I am Fliptrask," the goblin said. "The Trust Department at Gringotts is mine. You are a brother to William Weasley." Ron nodded quickly, and Fliptrask managed something vaguely resembling a smirk. "William Weasley is well regarded by most at Gringotts... he wagers well," he added.

All three students had remained standing; Fliptrask motioned with his hand, and they took their seats. The goblin knocked three times on the side of the carriage compartment and they began to move swiftly. Harry had been so caught unaware by Fliptrask that he hadn't paid any mind to the man seated to the goblin's right. The man was quite old – easily as old as Dumbledore or Croaker, he figured. He was

dressed in goblin finery, but also wore a rather flamboyant cloak; Gilderoy Lockhart came unbidden to Harry's mind. His hair was long and pure white, and tied into a ponytail similar to Bill Weasley. He had an absurd moustache – it shot to the left and right like daggers, but curled upward at the tips – and a goatee. There was an ornate sword at his side. He sat there almost primly and took in Harry with a disinterested look.

The man's eyes moved to Hermione and lingered. Harry thrust forward his hand. "Good morning, I'm Harry Potter. And you are...?"

The man's voice was much younger than the rest of him. He spoke with an accent that Harry thought to be French, though it wasn't nearly so sharp as Fleur Delacour's. "I know of you, Monsieur Potter," the man said. "I represent the Ministère de Magie before the International Conference of Wizards. I am the greatest living expert on the art of the duel. I have been a confidant of rulers, advisor to mages, acolyte of the greatest alchemist ever to live, defender of the crown, and saviour of wizardkind – not once, but twice. I, Monsieur, am your humble servant... Alexandre, Marquis de Maupassant." He leaned forward on the bench and gave a very formal half-bow.

Ron coughed furiously and Harry muttered, "Bloody hell!" under his breath. Hermione put her hand to her face, and unsuccessfully stifled a snort.

The Marquis's brow lifted. "What is this, ma chère? I am not familiar to you? Impossible!"

Hermione's cheeks coloured. "No! Er... not at all, Marquis. Harry is... something of a fan, you might say."

The Marquis beamed at Harry. "A fan? This is so? Did my very good friend Albus gift you with my humble book?" Hermione snorted again under her breath.

"It came from my godfather's library, actually," Harry said. "It's probably not the newest edition; it's rather old."

The Marquis laughed loudly. "But of course it is old, Monsieur Potter! It is old, and the Marquis is old - we are both, ehh... antiques."

Fliptrask let out a low rumbling laugh at that. "The Marquis has been an honoured friend of goblinkind for many years," he said. "The Smith Guild belonged to my grandsire when the Marquis first assisted us. The gratitude of a goblin is as long lasting as his vengeance." He stared pointedly at Harry, and added, "Remember that, Mister Potter."

The Marquis put on a mock frown. "But why are you so serious, my friend?" he asked Fliptrask. "Monsieur Potter and his charming companion and their guest are ready for celebration, not lectures! Come; let us turn to more pleasant things." He leaned forward and asked Harry very seriously, "Tell me, my young friend... what little tricks have you picked up from the book?" He broke into a broad smile, and Harry couldn't help but laugh; the man's certainly as full of himself as Lockhart, he thought.

"Harry cast catadromarius stranguria on someone. I'm curious as to your thoughts on that," Hermione said flatly.

The Marquis's eyebrows waggled. "My, my, my... Monsieur Potter! You've been a naughty young man, yes? And what dishonour led to that spell, I am wondering?"

Harry's throat tightened and he felt his face heat up. "I, erm, thought that someone had cast a Cutting Curse on Hermione here," he said.

"A Cutting Curse, you say? A Cutting Curse? You are, ehh, near to the end of your studies?" The Marquis toyed with the end of his moustache. "This is a grievous curse, true, but this splendid young lady could surely defend herself?"

"With what? Protego won't stop it, right?" Ron asked sourly.

The Marquis slowly shook his head. "No, no, Monsieur Weasley, not against a wizard of skill. Protego, this is your defence?" He pressed the back of his hand against his forehead. "Oh, Albus... my old friend Albus... has your head grown as soft as your robes?"

"Hermione didn't have a wand," Harry said.

The Marquis's face froze, and then his eyes narrowed and his nose flared. "Someone attacked this charming young woman –?"

"My name is Hermione Granger, Marquis," Hermione cut in.

The Marquis nodded. "Enchanté, Mademoiselle Granger," he said, and then began again, "Someone attacked the fair Mademoiselle Granger with a Cutting Curse when she was without wand? The attacker, he knew this?"

"He had to know it," Ron grumbled. "Rotten ferret... all he had to do was open his eyes."

The Marquis drew himself up as if to render judgment. "Catadromarius stranguria is no trifle, Monsieur Potter, but any man who would attack a woman unable to offer a defence... this man, he is a mere brute. This man lacks honour, my young friends. This man, he deserves his fate. So, tell me... was it effective?"

"Made me cross my legs, I'll tell you," Ron muttered.

"Malfoy didn't cast a Cutting Curse," Hermione pointed out. "Harry thought that he did, but he didn't. If he'd taken a moment before casting, Harry would have realised that."

"Ahh, I see – the fair Mlle. Granger, she belongs to, ehh, how you say... Raven's Claw?" the Marquis said. "Monsieur Potter, he is of course the Gryffindor, the lion. I am thinking that most times Monsieur Potter knows when to pounce, yes? I am thinking that this moment which you seek, it may as easily have meant your death, Mlle. Granger? I am thinking that in the duel there is no opportunity to, ehh, suffer the doubt?"

"I'm not a Ravenclaw," Hermione said briskly.

"Hermione's a Gryffindor, just like Ron and me," Harry added.



The Marquis bowed his head slightly. "I offer my humblest apologies, Mlle. Granger. It is only that you were thinking like the Raven's Claw – like my very good friend Filius. I had to teach him to be the lion. I do not criticise, dear young lady; the lion and the raven, they are good together I think."

"The intelligence of Ravenclaw and the courage of Gryffindor are a worthy combination, Miss Granger," Fliptrask said. "Instead we too often encounter the persistent Hufflepuff and the crafty Slytherin united. We goblins see more than most wizards know, Mister Potter – much more."

"Um... Fliptrask, sir... how far are we going?" Ron asked.

The goblin smiled, which Harry found just a bit frightening – it was all sharp-looking teeth and it reminded him of Winky. "If you refer to me as `sir' when we are amongst the clans, Mister Weasley, you will cause a stir. This carriage is efficient. We will arrive in twenty minutes."

\* \* \* \* \*

"No one said anything about horses," Ron protested.

Harry stood his ground. "You've ridden flying horses, Ron – invisible flying horses that feed on blood," he pointed out.

"That was an emergency," Ron glowered, "and these are... they're... well, they're horses – that's what they are!"

Harry's horse – an Arabian mare, the Marquis had said – nuzzled him, and he stroked its neck. "I don't see all the fuss," he said. "They seem fine to me."

"You obviously haven't ridden one of these before," Ron snapped. His horse snorted and nudged him with her head. "Geroff!" he shouted.

Harry laughed, "Spiders, horses... what else makes you shriek like a little girl, I wonder?" Ron growled at him, but Harry continued to

stroke his horse until she gave a contented shudder. "Can't be harder than managing a broom, I figure," he said.

"Oi, you ever ride a broom that goes one way when you want to go another?" Ron countered. His horse snatched her own reins out of Ron's hand and whinnied at him; "Give that back, you thief!" he demanded.

Hermione came through the gate into the paddock alongside a goblin in a scarlet coat. Harry was pleased to see Professor Flitwick strolling behind them.

Harry quickly waved. "Hello, er... Filius! Why didn't you tell me that you'd be here?"

Flitwick grinned. "Hullo, Harry! You didn't enquire, did you? Ah... it's a glorious day for this. Good morning, Mr. Weasley!"

Ron snatched back the reins from his horse. "Good morning, Professor," he said flatly.

Hermione's dress had been replaced by a crisply tailored version of the coat and breeches that Harry and Ron wore. "Oooh, aren't you gorgeous?" she cried out happily and made straight toward Ron.

Ron turned brilliantly red. "Um... Hermione... I... uh..."

Hermione brushed him aside and ran her fingers through the mane of Ron's horse. "I've never seen a colour quite like this! Remarkable..."

Ron began to cough and Harry quickly jumped in. "I thought you didn't care for horses," he said.

Hermione's shoulders rose, Harry noticed. "I don't care for Thestrals," she said without looking his way. "They're hardly the same thing."

The scarlet-coated goblin drew up beside Hermione. "Her name is Lojaali, young witch. She is an Akhal-Teke – they are from the Turkish highlands and very special horses indeed. She comes from

the Johtaja's personal stable." The goblin eyed Ron closely, and added, "You are in need of a larger horse than this, young wizard."

"Larger? This one looks ruddy huge to me!" Ron squeaked.

"Nonsense," Hermione chided him. "Harry could get by with her, but certainly not you."

The Marquis slowly rode out of the stable. He was perched atop a horse that looked to Harry to be powerful but old. Two goblins on much smaller brown horses flanked him as he entered the paddock. A third goblin led a strong-looking black horse. "Ah, Monsieur Weasley!" the Marquis called. "They have found a horse for you, I think!"

Ron's eyes saucered. "Er... I'm feeling attached to this one, right?" he squeaked.

"Surely not!" the Marquis laughed. "A knight errant must ride the proper sort of horse, yes? It is a proud stallion for you, sir! Stop this foolishness and claim your steed!"

Harry nudged Ron. "Make like you're approaching Buckbeak, mate. Don't show fear – show him respect," he whispered.

Ron let out an audible gulp that everyone politely ignored. He approached the horse half-wincing. "Here, boy... what's your name, boy?" Ron managed.

"Painajainen, according to the High Tongue," the goblin holding the horse's reins said. "In your tongue, this is Nightmare."

"Smashing," Ron murmured.

The scarlet-coated goblin moved in front of the stallion and gave a hand signal; the horse went stock still. He took the reins from the groomsman and nodded. "Guess I'll just, erm, climb aboard then..." Ron muttered. The groomsman gave Ron a foothold; Nightmare never budged an inch as Ron dragged himself up and over.

The goblin in scarlet turned to Hermione. "I apologise that you must remain with the trailing group, young witch."

Hermione nodded demurely. "I understand, Master Gralnor," she said; "I take no offence."

The goblin caught Harry's eye and bowed slightly. "I am Gralnor, Master of the Hunt," he said. "Mister Potter, you are offered a hunt button. You and your guest may ride with the hunting party... or you may accompany the young witch in the trailing group, if you desire."

Harry nodded curtly. He thought it odd that the goblin addressed him by name, but not Hermione. "May I ask, Gralnor... are women not allowed?" he said.

Master Gralnor's expression went sour. "We leave such distinctions to humans. The young witch must trail because she confuses the crups."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Er... the crups?"

"Yes, the crups," Master Gralnor returned. "Some of the crups initially mistook the young witch for a Muggle – this was not anticipated. She shall ride, but she must not disrupt the hunt proper."

Hermione mounted the golden horse in one practiced motion. "It's been too long since I've done this," she said brightly; "Thank you, Master Gralnor." The goblin tipped his cap to her.

Ron sat in the saddle as though he might accidentally break eggs. He said, "I'll stay back with Hermione." Sure, so she can keep you from going arse-over-teakettle, Harry thought; he held back a smirk and merely nodded.

"I'll take that button you mentioned," Harry said to Master Gralnor.

"Affix this to your lapel," Master Gralnor said. He handed Harry a small gold medallion with someone called St. Hubert depicted upon it, and added, "Your decision is correct. Fliptrask wishes that you join

him at the front.” Master Gralnor gave Harry a slight boost, and Harry mounted his horse with considerably more grace than Ron.

“I shall remain with the trailing group as well, for I must go gently with these old bones,” the Marquis said. “Rest assured that Monsieur Weasley will ride his steed with grace when I have finished with him!”

Harry managed to guide his horse toward Hermione, who had turned away from Ron and the Marquis with one hand stifling a laugh. “What have I gotten myself into?” he whispered to her urgently.

“It’s organised like a fox hunt,” Hermione whispered back, “but I can’t imagine we’re to be hunting foxes.”

“Let’s assume that I don’t know a single thing about a fox hunt?” Harry returned quietly.

“I’m not on solid ground, myself – not fond of the idea, honestly,” Hermione admitted. “All I can tell you for certain is that we’re meant to chase something. The hunting party follows the crups. Who knows what the crups will be following?” She shuddered.

Harry had a horrible thought for a moment, and he gave voice to it. “Erm... I’m sure they wouldn’t take us, you know... Muggle hunting...?”

“Of course they wouldn’t!” Hermione snapped. “It’s certainly not the sort of hunt I imagined, but even if they were inclined to hunt Muggles – and I sincerely doubt that – it would not only be bad business but bad form. They do know that I’m Muggle-born, Harry!”

“Move aside for the quarry!” Master Gralnor called out. Hermione’s horse moved to one side, and Harry managed to hold his horse still. A cart drawn by two of the small brown horses rumbled past, bearing a stack of cages. The ferret-like creatures inside mewled and hissed until they caught sight of the goblins and wizards, and then launched as one into long strings of the vilest obscenities Harry had ever heard.

“Jarveys!” Hermione exclaimed.

Harry's nose wrinkled at the shouting. "Well... they make it easy to root for the crups, eh? Good riddance!" he said. Hermione didn't smile, but she didn't scowl at the thought either.

The area at the front of the large barn began to fill with goblins and their mounts. The Marquis used the time to lead Ron around the paddock in a sort of abbreviated tuition; Hermione nodded in agreement frequently, and Harry began to pay close attention to the instructions. Then she nudged Harry and led him through a few paces.

"When did you learn all of this?" Harry asked.

"I had a horse when I was younger," Hermione said. "It was something I was good at – riding, I mean... but it was two hours' drive to the stable and I knew it was costly, so we let it go."

"I could keep horses in St. Ebb, you know," Harry said impulsively. "There's a stable inside the tower walls, and... what?"

Hermione frowned at him rather severely, which he hadn't expected at all. "You should ride quite a lot before you even consider taking on horses," she said.

"I thought you might like to ride, that's all," Harry mumbled.

"That's madness, Harry!" Hermione protested. "You'd outfit a stable so that I could ride a few times each year? You've no idea of the expense!"

Harry shrugged. "I could have the stable cleaned up, buy the best horses, hire the right sort of help, and never notice the expense," he said.

Hermione moved to ride away from him. "That's not something Harry Potter would say," she said coldly.

Harry manoeuvred in front of her. "What? I'm supposed to feel guilty because I have money?" he snapped.

"You were rich in every way that matters long before you had Galleons to flaunt," Hermione shot back. "I'm not impressed by wealth."

"Flaunt? What are you on about?" Harry demanded.

"I don't want to argue with you; I won't be a distraction," Hermione insisted, and with a slight move of the reins the golden Akhal circled away from him.

Harry gritted his teeth. "I'd buy Ron a new broom every day if he asked," he called after her. "If you want all the books at Flourish and Blotts, they're yours! What else am I supposed to do with it? I finally have something to give, and you accuse me of flaunting it?"

A series of emotions played across Hermione's face, and Harry could read each argument and counterargument within her. He'd noticed that tendency about her long before Snape's meddling, but it stood in sharper relief now. "See how you feel about horses after riding," she said evenly. "Now try a few small jumps; you'll need them to keep with the hunting party."

By the time that Gralnor began to form up the riders into groups, Harry's irritation with Hermione had faded and he was reasonably certain that he could take his horse over small obstacles without sending himself to the turf. Ron was sitting with more confidence; the Marquis clapped him on the shoulder as he passed. Harry saw the Marquis slip his wand out briefly and flick it toward Ron; there was a very subtle change in the way that Ron's breeches clung to the saddle.

"A Sticking Charm – should have thought of that," Hermione sniggered. "Ron will be fine, you know? Don't pay attention to his horse's name; he's a Friesian – a real pussycat."

"Maybe I should be riding one of those," Harry said.

"You'll be fine; just stay within yourself," Hermione assured him. "Your horse seems to fancy you, anyway – what's her name?"

“Salamaa,” Gralnor called out. Harry’s horse shuddered at the sound of her name, and advanced more or less on her own until she lined up just behind the assembled hunting party.

Flitwick rode up beside him, atop one of the compact brown horses that the goblins obviously favoured. “I imagine you’ve had little opportunity to ride, Harry,” he said. “We used to teach horsemanship at Hogwarts, in the days when Muggles still used horse and carriage. Then again, duelling with swords was once part of the Defence curriculum. The times change and we change with them – begrudgingly in some cases, foolishly in others.”

“Dumbledore suggested that you might be here,” Harry said.

“I am closely connected to the world of goblins,” Flitwick returned. “Albus knows this well. I was surprised that he did not consult with me in detail about this, but the Headmaster is quite capable of choosing his own counsel.”

“You could have spoken to me,” Harry said.

“You could have done the same,” Flitwick pointed out. “Albus is your master; you are his apprentice. I shall not interfere in that. In any case, learning to select your own counsel is a part of taking one’s place in the world. Perhaps next time you will choose me, if appropriate? Perhaps you will not; I shan’t take offence either way.”

Harry let out a frustrated sigh. “But that’s so... so...”

“Passive? Meek?” Flitwick laughed merrily. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand, Harry, not on first consideration. Ravenclaws understand that the artistry of flight lies in knowing when to steer and when to let the broom do as it will.”

Harry didn’t hear Fliptrask ride up behind him; he was startled to hear the goblin address Flitwick: “I offer the blessings of the clan, kinsman.”

“I offer my fealty in return, within the bounds of my obligations and any claims upon me,” Flitwick answered.



Harry gaped at Flitwick. “Kinsman?”

“Filius and I share an ancestor – a great-grandsire,” Fliptrask said before Flitwick could respond; “Did you think that your professor achieved the perfect stature merely by accident?” Flitwick’s peals of laughter were the counterpoint to Fliptrask’s gruff yowls. Flitwick then said something in what Harry presumed to be Gobbledegook and then clasped Fliptrask’s forearm in a very formal way. Fliptrask responded in kind and broke into a toothy smile.

Flitwick saw the lost look in Harry’s eyes, and explained, “I was wishing him luck, Harry – it’s a tradition of the hunt. ‘May you be predator and not prey’, the saying goes.”

“Luck that I shall not require today,” Fliptrask added. “This is no hunt - it is a ritual, it is all trappings. That is enough for most of my brothers and sisters now. Someday when the wind is light and the moon is high, you will join me, Mister Potter. You will see what it is to truly hunt.”

Flitwick looked past Fliptrask into the distance. “Good heavens. Is that... is the Johtaja coming today?”

Fliptrask brought his horse around without appearing to make a single movement. “It is the Volvar, Filius. The Volvar’s plans are her own – we are her instruments,” he said evenly.

Harry remembered the term ‘volvar’ from the book that Covelli and Dumbledore had provided; a volvar was a religious leader, some sort of high priestess. The goblin that approached the assembled trailing group was obviously important – dressed in very fine robes and attended by several other goblins.

“The Volvar has come here?” Flitwick asked. “I must say that she looks like the Johtaja.” The professor was unnerved, and Harry didn’t find that helpful at all.

“You have met the Volvar, Filius,” Fliptrask said. “The Volvar was merely Johtaja then.”

Flitwick's eyebrows exploded upward. "Good heavens!"

"She is both Volvar and Johtaja now," Fliptrask said quietly. "Gretella went to the next life ten days past. It has not been told to the clans yet."

"She's now both, you say? Has that ever happened before, even for a short time?" Flitwick asked in an urgent whisper. Fliptrask didn't answer.

Harry struggled to recall the word 'johtaja'. By the time that he did, the Volvar had drawn up to the Marquis, who was flanked by Ron and Hermione. A johtaja was a political leader of some sort; the book had been quite murky on that point.

"She is acquainted with the Marquis, of course," Fliptrask said. "There are few of our age who are not." Flitwick nodded fervently.

The Volvar nodded to the Marquis, and uttered a greeting of some sort in Gobbledegook. The Marquis returned the nod, and said, "Madame Johtaja, I am your humble servant – Alexandre, Marquis de Maupassant. This is most unexpected, yes?"

"I expected it entirely," the Volvar returned. "The hunt has been blessed by your gifts to us, and in return we offer blessing to you. Our kinsmen across the sea had thought you too infirm to journey from your lands."

"Fate is fickle, Madame," the Marquis said gravely. "There is yet one more hunt before me – one more pledge to fulfil – and there is enough life in these bones for one last great adventure."

The Volvar raised her hand, palm open. "May you have cool days and clear skies and the protection of the earth and the winds," she intoned. "May the dreamtime be restful and may your conscience be clear. So is the will of the clans." The goblins began to mutter anxiously.

The Marquis doffed his hat and bowed deeply. "You grant me undeserved honour... Madame Volvar. I accept the will of the clans."

The muttering was punctuated by shrill voices now. The Volvar's eyes turned to Hermione, and the Marquis began, "I would be pleased to introduce –"

"The witchling is not one of yours, Marquis," the Volvar cut him off. "She is known to us. The Guilds would gladly have her, and perhaps that shall be her path one day." She raised a hand toward Hermione and said, "Greetings, Saattaja." Hermione looked around to see who the goblin was addressing.

A goblin bigger and more corpulent than Fliptrask came riding from behind Harry. "What is this outrage?" he growled.

"My word..." Flitwick whispered; he was ashen.

Fliptrask nudged Harry and muttered, "It is Grishtok. The Guilds are his." Finally Harry felt as though he was on some sort of solid ground. The Guilds were at the heart of goblin culture, according to the book he had read. There was a banking guild that operated Gringotts, a smithing guild that produced weapons and metalwork, a mining guild, and so forth. Harry figured that this Grishtok was two or more rungs higher on the goblin ladder than Fliptrask, but Fliptrask was very matter-of-fact – not at all intimidated.

The Volvar withdrew a scroll from within her robes and presented it to Grishtok. "From Gretella, with our compliments," she said.

"Did I hear correctly? Did she say 'saattaja'?" Flitwick asked urgently.

"Yes," growled Fliptrask even as he waved the professor off.

Grishtok opened the scroll, glanced at it, and thrust it back at the Volvar. "Irregular," he accused as though delivering a curse.

"Valid," the Volvar returned.

"Indeed," Grishtok said, teeth bared.

"Announce it," the Volvar said calmly.

Grishtok let out a hostile snarl, and then shouted, "Volvar Gretella is no more! The choosing stone has selected Kolmetoista to follow! Kolmetoista is now Johtaja and Volvar!" He virtually spat the last of it.

The balance of the goblins present seemed to be in shock. Fliptrask summoned a false smile, even as he fumed, "She dishonoured Grishtok – the clans may not be pleased."

He began to ride toward the smiling Volvar and the angry Guild leader and the confused trailing party, but Flitwick stopped him, asking, "What are you going to do?"

"Congratulate my kinswoman; you should do the same," Fliptrask rumbled.

Harry in turn stopped Flitwick. "Professor, what's a 'saattaja'?" he asked. "I'm sure that word wasn't in the book Dumbledore gave us."

Flitwick frowned, which was something Harry couldn't recall seeing more than a handful of times. "A saattaja is a soror mystica – a mystical companion. I shall offer my congratulations and then the Volvar will explain to me why she has addressed one of my students in that way," the professor said with a hint of steel in his voice, "and Fliptrask surely knows more than he's letting on." Flitwick brushed his heels against his horse and made toward the growing crowd.

Harry followed at a much slower pace. By the time he arrived Flitwick was snarling in Gobbledegook, Fliptrask was snapping in return, and the Volvar was pointedly ignoring the both of them. She spotted Harry and stopped finger-combing her horse's mane. "I bid you welcome, Chosen One," she called out. "I trust you understand the honour bestowed upon you through your invitation today, and the clans are honoured in return by your presence." The phrase 'Chosen One' created a stir amongst her attendants.

Ron looked bewildered, and Harry figured that he probably looked the same; for her part, Hermione was locked in a rapid-fire conversation with the Marquis. Harry had no idea what to say, and he was beginning to regret the time wasted on the Headmaster's book about goblin culture. "I suppose I've been chosen in a way, erm, Your

Honour... but I imagine we don't mean the same thing?" he said at last.

The Volvar rode forward until she was close enough to reach for Harry's hand. He realised that she was reaching for his forearm in the same way that he'd seen Flitwick reach for Fliptrask, so he responded as closely as he could remember. She nodded appreciatively, and he let out a breath. "I am Kolmetoista," she said. "The clans are mine, and the temple falls to my sisters and to me. You will please address me as Volvar, wizardling."

Harry nodded in agreement. "I am honoured, Volvar; so are Hermione and Ron, I'm sure –"

"All three of you are chosen – and another, we see – but you are the Chosen One," the Volvar said.

Harry said quickly, "Yes, well... is that why you called Hermione a... a 'saattaja'? And chosen by whom? For what? I don't know –?"

The Volvar smiled; unlike Fliptrask or the other goblins he'd seen, Harry saw nothing threatening in her smile. "But you shall, Chosen One, in the fullness of time," she said. "The Saattaja understands." Hermione was watching closely, brows raised and eyes wide; it certainly didn't appear that she understood whatever it was that she was supposed to understand.

"The crups grow anxious," Grishtok snarled.

"The crups will wait," the Volvar said airily. "You wish to say something, Chosen One?"

Harry forced himself not to fidget. "Don't hold up the hunt on my account, Volvar," he allowed. "That wouldn't be fair to everyone else."

Grishtok relaxed in his saddle. "Agreed," he said. "You ride with us at the front, wizard."

The Volvar cast a shrewd glance at Harry, before she announced, "I ride with Saattaja. We do not want to 'hold up' the hunt, after all."

Harry didn't need to take in any emotions not his own; he imagined that everyone could feel the chill between the two goblin leaders.

Grishtok motioned to Harry and rode away. Harry followed, but watched over his shoulder as the Volvar rode to Hermione. Hermione gave a modest bow, which drew gasps from the Volvar's attendants and a rumbling murmur from amongst the trailing party. Her horse suddenly chose to bow as well, which very nearly sent Hermione tumbling forward over the horse's head before she regained her balance. Harry heard Ron make a choice exclamation and saw the Marquis politely stifle laughter before his horse picked up speed of its own accord.

After the jarveys were released, followed a few minutes later by the crups, the hunt proved itself to be almost achingly slow. For animals intended to track jarveys, the crups seemed indiscriminate; they would go haring off after rabbits or even the occasional fox. Each time the hunting party would begin a calculated advance, and each time the party would slow again and allow Master Gralnor and the crup handlers to regroup. The riding was sedate for the most part, although they had forded a stream or two and crossed a ravine.

Harry felt good about his performance on horseback, and it was a smashing day – cool enough to be comfortable in coat and breeches but remarkably sunny for September. The goblins spent more time in conversation than attending to the hunt, he thought. They spoke in Gobbledegook, so Harry had asked Flitwick whether they were actually conducting business. Flitwick had answered that there was less business being conducted than he might expect. Harry asked whether Flitwick might translate some of the goings-on; Flitwick responded that Harry would learn more by watching who spoke to whom than by knowing what was said.

More than two hours passed without any of the goblins speaking to him; he felt pointedly avoided. He figured that he had learned a little, at least. There were clearly two sorts of goblins. One sort struck him as the Gringotts variety of goblin – more slightly built, perhaps a bit fussy. The other sort brought Professor Binns' goblin rebellion lectures to life – stout, aggressive, exuding a feeling of power. Grishtok was clearly of the second variety. Fliptrask seemed to be as

well, rather unlike his Gringotts colleagues. Flitwick struck Harry as a twice-removed product of the first sort.

Harry was frustrated but proud of himself for holding it in. Fliptrask unexpectedly circled away from his position close to Master Gralnor and rode beside Harry. "How do you fare in the saddle, Mister Potter?" he asked.

"Well, I've managed to keep from falling off," Harry said, and several goblins joined Fliptrask in what Harry took to be polite laughter.

"Filius says that horses are no longer kept at the school," Fliptrask said with clear disapproval. "You would not have ridden before – not with your particular Muggles. Your first ride exceeds expectations."

"Thank you," Harry said. "Can I ask a question?"

Fliptrask smiled and bared his teeth. The hunting party slowed from a crawl to a halt. "You can and you may ask," he said.

"I appreciate being here, I understand that it's an honour... erm... it's a brilliant day to be doing this... but what's all this about?" Harry asked as calmly as he could manage. "Why was I invited here?"

The surrounding party went completely silent. Harry sat perfectly still in the saddle – if he'd just somehow angered most of the important goblins in Britain, he decided it was best to let them upbraid him for it. Grishtok, the Guild leader, pulled out a pocket watch that at a glance seemed nearly as complicated and outlandish as the one Dumbledore carried. "Over two hours, Fliptrask," he said. "Two Galleons to you."

"We remain one hundred and eight Galleons net to your favour, Grishtok," Fliptrask returned.

"As it should be," Grishtok grunted. The goblin rode forward very slowly, his gaze unwavering and thoroughly frightening. Harry felt like a goose facing Christmas.

“For over two hours, wizard, we have talked around you, ignored you, behaved as if you meant nothing,” Grishtok said, “and you have done nothing, said nothing. Why do you show such weakness?”

“Weakness? I didn’t want to offend anyone,” Harry said. “Mostly I was just watching, like Filius suggested. This is all new to me – there’s a lot to learn.”

Grishtok’s eyes narrowed. “To learn?”

“Well... yes! I mean, we all read a book before coming, but it wasn’t very complete –” Harry began.

“What book is this?” Grishtok demanded.

“I know of the book in question, Grishtok,” Flitwick offered. “It offers a reasonably fair-minded interpretation of goblin culture, but Harry is correct – it is rather spotty.”

“You did not wish to offend us – why should that matter?” Grishtok snarled.

“Why would I want to offend you? I’m a guest here – that would be terribly rude of me!” Harry blurted out. “This makes no sense! Am I supposed to be rude?”

Grishtok returned in a low voice, “We are mere goblins, wizard – why care whether or not you offend?”

Harry was bewildered, and he tried to keep it from his voice. “I wouldn’t be rude to anyone who invited me to visit. Look, I admit I’m probably on best behaviour here – most all of you here are surely very important, and I’d rather not have the end of the world on my head!”

“We are mere goblins,” Grishtok repeated.

“Gringotts is the only bank in Britain for wizards, isn’t it?” Harry said. “You make the Galleons and Sickles and Knuts, for Merlin’s sake!



Gringotts goes away and so does wizarding Britain, I figure. Explain to me how you're not important?"

Grishtok's gaze sharpened even further. "It would be best if you kept that opinion from your Minister for Magic," he said slowly.

Harry laughed. "If Fudge can't come up with that on his own, then he's not very bright, is he?"

Fliptrask caught Grishtok's eye, and the Guild leader gave a curt nod. "Mister Potter," Fliptrask said, "many wizards would have declined our invitation outright. Of those accepting, most would come on account of their wealth and our hand in it. Why are you here? Are you here because your master desires it be so? Why are you different?"

Harry took a long breath to settle himself rather than snap back at his hosts. "Voldemort is out there," he answered at last, provoking a number of anxious hisses that only served to stir him up. "Some day, he'll come calling. He's already sought out the giants and the werewolves. I don't know if he'll offer you the world or try to kill you all, but he'll come. He'll come because you're treated like you don't matter, and he'll try to use that —"

"You think it wrong, wizard — the way we are treated?" asked a very old goblin from behind Grishtok.

"Beings are better than beasts, wizards are better than beings and Muggles, purebloods are better than Muggle-borns... sometimes I think wizards only know how to look down on everyone else," Harry said. "You know, History of Magic is one goblin rebellion after the next, and I guess I see why that's so. So yes, I think it's wrong." He hesitated for a moment, and then added, "The Ministry probably deserves a rebellion right about now."

Amidst a symphony of mutters and whispers, Grishtok's voice cut through. "You have just committed treason, young Potter," he said with a hint of pleasure.

Harry shrugged. "Really? Oh well, I'm used to being in trouble with the Ministry."

Grishtok crossed his arms and stared at Harry for the longest time. "Fliptrask," he barked into the silence, "another fifty Galleons to you. Do not make a habit of this." For his part, Fliptrask winced.

"Will someone answer my question now?" Harry advanced.

"Acceptable," Grishtok said. "We control the money, as you say. You are the money, to a great degree. If you favour us, the possibilities are interesting."

"And then there are the Muggles..." Fliptrask muttered.

"Yes, yes, Fliptrask has his ideas about wider interests," Grishtok said dismissively. "The Gringotts directorship will not consent beyond current arrangements with the Muggle bank."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "It's done all right for me, hasn't it? I mean, the Potter Trust wouldn't be nearly as big if it weren't for all the stock shares and properties and what-not. I'd have to look – and I don't pretend to understand all of it – but Fliptrask here has to be responsible for a lot of the money I have... with everybody around me, er, dying all the time, he's had to manage everything – and did a fine job of it, too, according to Ted... um, Ted Tonks, that is... my solicitor..." Harry trailed off as Fliptrask began to growl at him.

"This is accurate?" Grishtok barked.

Before Fliptrask could answer, Harry added, "That's the reason my money's still in Gringotts. I thought about pulling everything, see, but I didn't... Gringotts has done right by me. Well... that and Ted did say I might crush the whole wizarding economy, or something of the kind."

Grishtok grew noticeably reddish. "Fliptrask! Another fifty galleons to you!"

Fliptrask rubbed his hands together nervously. "Unnecessary, Grishtok," he muttered.

“Honour satisfied, Fliptrask,” Grishtok fired back. “You would do well to wager and lose – VERY SOON. GRALNOR! Do something with your worthless crups!”

Harry’s horse startled and backed away a pace as Master Gralnor squeaked at the crup handlers. Grishtok took several growling, gnashing breaths, then spun to face Harry. He shuddered as though he was shaking away his mood, and then flashed a faint but notable smile. Harry found his arm pulled into the ceremonial shake before he could react.

“Some of your forebears favoured us in times of need as the Marquis de Maupassant has done. You do honour to your line. We will do business, Harry, son of James Potter, and we shall both prosper of it,” the Guild leader said solemnly.

Harry was startled. “Th-thank you, Grishtok,” he managed.

Grishtok stroked his chin. “It... could be... that the Johtaja is correct. Perhaps we shall soon hunt together, as she maintains? We shall feast after this embarrassment of a hunt, then, and we will talk of suitable prey.”

“Err... sounds smashing... looking forward to it...” Harry stammered. His hand didn’t twitch in Grishtok’s grasp, which felt like an achievement. The goblin let go of Harry’s arm, inclined his head in a way that suggested a bow, and rode off to light into Master Gralnor over the pace of the hunt, the colour of the crups, and a host of other things beyond the huntsman’s control. Fliptrask stayed where he was, with an icy glare directed at Harry.

Flitwick came aside Harry and pumped his hand furiously. “Good show, Harry – good show!” he said in a forceful whisper. “You’ve accomplished decades of advancement in goblin-wizarding relations just now!”

Fliptrask snorted, “Hardly! Mister Potter has just advanced his own relations with Grishtok – at my expense.”

“I didn’t set out to make him angry,” Harry said quickly. “I thought he should know I’m pleased with Gringotts, that’s all – that I appreciate what you’ve done. “I’m sorry if I’ve managed to get you into trouble –”

Fliptrask wagged his finger at Harry. “Thank the gods Grishtok has gone! If you were to offer me apology in his presence, then he would now be indebted to me and my time at Gringotts would grow short – do you understand?”

“No, I don’t understand!” Harry fired back. “Have you been wagering on me – is that it?”

“Of course there are wagers – do you know nothing of our ways...? Filius... you explained nothing?” Fliptrask slowly lowered his head into his hands. “I have arranged my own doom,” he muttered.

“You were warned, Fliptrask,” Flitwick laughed. “The larger the stage, the better Harry performs. It seems you disregarded my advice, in which case it was a wasteful use of your time to seek me out. As for the rest, Harry is Albus Dumbledore’s apprentice and not mine.”

Fliptrask shook his head. “Grishtok avoids wizards – he loathes them. He rose entirely through the Smithy; not a day was willingly spent at Gringotts. Mister Potter is known to have a short temper, and you know the depths of Grishtok’s rudeness today...”

Harry was tired of being talked around; his jaw tightened. “Never wager against me,” he snapped.

Fliptrask’s glare became more calculating. “Point taken,” he said. “You will not speak favourably of me for the rest of this day.” With that he rode in Grishtok’s general direction.

Flitwick chuckled softly. “Don’t take him seriously, Harry. Fliptrask is far more secure within Gringotts than he let on. I’d be quite surprised if the Guild of Finance doesn’t pass to his control, and it’s possible that you may have just sped the process along.”

“But why –?” Harry began.

“Goblins are unaccustomed to having their standing altered so publicly,” Flitwick explained, “and quite unaccustomed to having it positively altered by a wizard. When Fliptrask regains his composure, he’ll recognise what you’ve done for him. Then he’ll have to determine how best he can take advantage of the opportunity.”

Harry shook his head. “What a waste of time! Why don’t they just decide what needs to be done, and do it?”

Flitwick laughed merrily. “Oh, Harry – out of the mouths of babes! I mean no disrespect, of course, but only a young man such as you could say such a thing!” Before Harry could protest, he held up a hand and went on, “You were not raised as a wizard. There are times that this is a tremendous advantage – now, for example – and times when you may be hampered by it. Tell me, do you think that the Ministry for Magic functions more as you have just witnessed, or as the ideal that you have described?”

Harry had seen enough of Fudge and Percy Weasley to know the answer, but he was cut off by a round of furious barking from the crups. The handlers and Master Gralnor raced after them, followed closely by Grishtok and Fliptrask, and then the remainder of the hunting party.

“Off we go!” Flitwick cried and they joined the pursuit.

The crups led a spirited chase that led through a dense patch of forest and into a meadow beyond. They stopped at the edge of the trees for a few moments, yipping and circling, and then tore across the open space.

“GRALNOR! We are not chasing jarveys – what are they after?” Grishtok bellowed for all to hear. Harry figured that Grishtok was right; the crups had never run so hard, and he hadn’t heard a single insult from the jarveys for more than an hour.

Gralnor had dismounted and was huddled with his handlers and a handful of the crups. “The crups have pursued something similar to the quarry, Grishtok,” the Hunt Master announced.

“Similar? In what way?” Grishtok demanded.

Fliptrask left his saddle more gracefully than his bulk suggested and joined the handlers on the ground. Harry was sure that the goblin sniffed at the earth more than once. “Here,” Fliptrask announced after several minutes. “They were drawn by two animals. One has tracks like a jarvey, but smaller. The other looks to be a fox.” He drew Gralnor’s attention to a patch of dirt. “A fox chasing a ferret, perhaps?”

“That makes no sense,” Grishtok snorted from his mount.

“It is not a ferret,” Gralnor said. “I say a rodent of some sort, less than one foot in length.”

“Not a rabbit,” Fliptrask said.

“Agreed,” Gralnor nodded.

“This is not a pursuit,” Fliptrask said. “These animals were running together.”

“Nonsense,” Grishtok declared. “Why would a fox and a – what, a rat? – run together? For that matter, why would the crups be drawn off again? I question the training of these animals, Gralnor. They should be attracted to magic, not haring off after simple forest creatures.”

Harry snapped to attention. “A rat? Did you say a rat?”

“You have something to contribute, Potter?” Grishtok barked.

Harry’s hands shook. “If it’s a rat, it’ll have a silver forepaw,” he snarled.

When Harry drew his wand, two goblins rode in front of Grishtok, but the Guild leader waved them off. “A rat with a false limb?” he scoffed.

Flitwick's wand seemed to appear from nowhere. "Harry... I thought Mr. Pettigrew to have died as a result of his scuffle with Mr. Weasley," he said.

"Ron said he disappeared; there wasn't a trace of him found," Harry returned. He looked up to see Ron and the Marquis de Maupassant approaching from the trailing party, along with a trio of goblins.

"We may be dealing with a rat Animagus, Grishtok," Flitwick said. "Harry's conclusion is reasonable."

"A rat might have slipped the wards surrounding the hunting grounds," Master Gralnor allowed, "but not a fox."

The Marquis halted beside Fliptrask. "What is this? We are no longer hunting the jarveys?" he asked.

"Mr. Potter believes we may face an intruder," Fliptrask said.

"Young Potter sees Animagi scurrying through the underbrush," Grishtok huffed.

"Bloody hell... did you see Wormtail?" Ron blurted out.

"The crups were chasing a rat," Harry said.

"Monsieur Grishtok, you have protective wards in place, yes?" the Marquis asked.

"Gralnor says that something the size of a rat might have passed through the wards," Grishtok allowed. "There is a fox with the rat – if it is a rat at all – and a fox could not have entered."

The Marquis twirled his moustache. "These wards, they are... ehh... permanent?"

"The lodge is permanently warded," Master Gralnor explained, "but the hunting ground is only warded for the hunt. Anti-Muggle charms were cast last Monday and the wards were placed on Thursday."

"Then the fox, she could have come onto the grounds before the wards were cast," the Marquis concluded. "Most of the animal magicks, they can be held for many days. The fox, she could... ehh... forage?"

Grishtok's brow furrowed. "This rat Animagus is a known danger, is that correct?"

Flitwick nodded furiously. "Peter Pettigrew is a known associate of Voldemort," he said, "and anyone in his company is surely a Death Eater."

"The wizards would be here for Mister Potter," Fliptrask said.

"They could also be here for Miss Granger or Mr. Weasley," Flitwick added.

Grishtok bared his teeth. "Unacceptable," he growled. "These are goblin lands. The hunt is a sacred thing. The wizards and the witch are guests. If these things are here, they profane the hunt. If they would do harm in this place, then they have no honour."

Harry slipped from his horse to look at the tracks for himself. Two of the crups were moving in circles a few feet away. One broke off, licked at Harry's hand, gave a long whimper, and then returned to the circling.

Harry slowly edged toward the two crups. "Pettigrew! We know you're here!" he shouted out. "If you show yourself right now, you might live! If you don't, we'll let the crups have you!" From the corner of his eye, he saw Fliptrask, Flitwick and the Marquis carefully fan out.

Ron made the barest of gestures to catch Harry's attention; he directed his eyes just beyond the crups and his eyebrows rose slightly. The nose and shining forepaw of a rat were barely visible within a thick tuft of grass. Harry gave a hint of a nod and then carefully signalled Flitwick. The Marquis also caught the nod; he produced a wand from somewhere and his lips moved though he said nothing aloud. The thick grass rustled and the rat took on dishevelled



human form, which sent the goblins into a rage and the crups into a panic.

Pettigrew instantly directed his metal hand at Harry. "Stay back," he bellowed, "unless you fancy your Chosen One in pieces!"

"If I give the order, you die," Grishtok snarled in return.

"And young Harry will meet his parents sooner than any of you would like," Pettigrew said. "We have a stalemate, don't we?"

"I don't recall you as delusional, Peter," Flitwick said. "Surely you don't believe that you'll be allowed to go free?"

Harry felt no fear, only mounting anger. "You've forgotten with whom you're dealing," he said coldly.

Pettigrew's face twitched. "I can be useful to you, Harry," he said nervously.

"My parents are dead because of you," Harry snapped, "and only Merlin knows how many others!" Sweat formed on his brow and he felt a familiar draft. He realised what was happening, if not why, and he wanted it to overtake him. He wanted to tear Pettigrew apart with his bare hands.

Pettigrew's eyes widened. "C-call the Aurors, P-Professor Flitwick," he said. When Flitwick didn't move, he squeaked, "G-go on, call them!"

"I don't think so," Harry hissed.

Pettigrew took a halting step backward. "You're going to k-kill me? I t-thought you were your m-mother's son!"

"She wouldn't see you dead after what you've done? I doubt that," Harry sneered.

The rumble of horses at a full gallop sounded behind Harry. "Grishtok! GRISHTOK! A wizard has the Volvar, Grishtok!" someone called out.

"The fox!" Fliptrask shouted.

Heads turned out of simple reflex and Pettigrew was gone. The two crups who had been circling yipped and tore off across the meadow. Harry jumped onto his horse, Salamaa, and raced after the crups. As he reached the far side of the meadow, he saw Pettigrew return to human form and race into the dense forest beyond. The crups hesitated for a moment before they followed. Salamaa showed no sign of slowing and Harry pulled hard on the reins. He was completely unprepared for the rapid stop that resulted; he nearly somersaulted over Salamaa's head and barely managed to instead tumble forward and to the side.

He was still face-down when another horse halted beside him; a few moments later, the rider rolled him over and offered a hand up. "Now we shall hunt," Fliptrask said, flashing his unnerving toothy smile. The goblin held an enormous dark sword in his other hand in a fashion that hinted he knew well how to use it.

The forest was thick and tall. Harry cast a quick spell to quiet his footfalls and Fliptrask was unnaturally silent as he passed through spaces that seemed half as wide as his belly. The trees were oddly quiet besides – there were no bird calls, no movement of animals, no branches rustling in the breeze. It seemed to Harry as though centaurs and spiders should inhabit the shadows.

Fliptrask placed his hand on Harry's forearm; Harry managed to bite back a shout. The goblin motioned ahead and whispered, "He's nearly to the far side... must be changing back and forth."

"Where do the wards end?" Harry asked.

"Just beyond the trees," Fliptrask said. "We can't overtake him."

"Can you keep a secret?" Harry demanded.

Fliptrask scowled at him. "That is a ridiculous question. The Trust Department at Gringotts is mine."

Harry weighed his options for an instant, then reached out and grabbed Fliptrask by the arm. "Hold on tightly," he muttered and then popped.

They reappeared just outside the forest. Fliptrask stumbled hard, barely missing the edge of his own sword in the process. Something grabbed Harry from behind. He wrested himself free and turned to face Pettigrew, an extended silver hand, and the dangerous end of his own wand.

"I won't hurt you," Pettigrew insisted. "I... I can't do it... but I can stun you – AAAAGGH!" A black blur whipped past Harry's left arm with no more than an inch to spare and Pettigrew's silver hand lay on the ground in a growing pool of blood.

"Your head is next!" Fliptrask shouted. Pettigrew staggered to one side and in an instant became a rat scurrying through the grass. The goblin hustled past Harry and chased the thin red trail Pettigrew left, his sword crashing into the ground again and again. A flash of blue raced across the field as the rat slipped through the wards and Fliptrask was thrown backward. Pettigrew reappeared, pale and shaking. He tossed Harry's wand into the grass and squeezed the stump of his right arm, and disappeared without a sound. Harry reached out his hand and summoned his wand; it bounced in the grass for a moment, and then shot through the wards and into his grasp.

"BLAST AND DAMNATION!" Fliptrask bellowed as he crawled to his feet. His blazing eyes suddenly grew even wider. "The Volvar! I cannot fail twice!"

Harry slipped off his waistcoat and used it to pick up Pettigrew's silver hand. "You didn't fail," he said firmly. "Hang on – and mind your sword." With another pop, Harry and Fliptrask piled into the ground just behind a crowd of goblins gathered in a circle.

A kneeling wild-eyed wizard who Harry didn't recognise held the Volvar tight, one arm around her waist and the other holding his wand buried into the side of her neck. Hermione stood there, her lip bloodied and left eye blackening, with her wand aimed at the wizard's head. Several of the Volvar's attendants brandished swords, and Flitwick, Ron and the Marquis brandished their wands.

"You bring me Potter, I tell you!" the wizard howled. "Potter and me, we get out of here and the goblin lives! Cross me and the goblin's dead!"

"I'm here," Harry called out. "We had to deal with your friend first." The crowd parted for him and he stepped into the circle. He tossed open his waistcoat and the bloodied hand tumbled out. The goblins let out a collective hiss. Fliptrask made his way to the fore and made a show of wiping his sword with a cloth.

"You get me out of here, Potter! Set me free or it dies!" shouted the wizard.

Harry went to Hermione's side. He put his hand to her cheek and asked, "Did he do this to you?"

She nodded. Her eyes were like dark flames. "I won't let you set him free," she said hoarsely.

"Of course not," Harry acknowledged.

The wizard seemed very close to madness. "Potter! I'm not making a joke! It dies!"

Harry shook his head. "Do you honestly think that this is going to work?"

"It dies!" the wizard gibbered.

Harry made quick eye contact with the Volvar. The corner of her mouth curled upward, and then she stomped hard on the wizard's foot. He loosed his hold for just a moment, and she slammed her

elbow into his stomach. As the Volvar rolled free, the goblins shrieked and closed in.

The wizard levelled his wand and his lips began to move, but a loud, high voice called out, "SECTUMSEMPRA!" A flash of purple rent the wizard from shoulder to hip and he crumpled to the ground.

The goblins stopped in their tracks and simply stared at Hermione as she dashed forward and began to kick the fallen wizard in the side. "Did you think I wouldn't fight back? I won't be hurt again, do you hear? Never again! NEVER AGAIN!" she shouted with each kick.

Harry was so startled that Hermione managed several more kicks before he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back. "Let me go!" she screamed.

"It's over, Hermione," Harry said. "It's over now."

"Did you hear him, calling the Volvar 'it'? That's how they are! He thinks she's a beast! He... he thinks I'm a beast!" Hermione clawed at Harry's arms. "I'll show him a bloody beast! Let me go!"

The Volvar took Hermione's hand. "The danger is past, Saattaja," she said quietly. "I am safe. Your Chosen One is safe. Justice will be done."

Hermione seemed to become boneless in Harry's arms. "You could have been killed," she said haltingly to the Volvar. "I wasn't paying any mind to the surroundings, and –"

"Do you see my attendants, young one?" the Volvar asked. "The wizard was upon us before they could draw their swords. You are not responsible for my safety, though I honour your concern. We will speak of your anger, Saattaja. I will know what has been done to you." She held up her hand. "A moment, please."

Grishtok stood with one foot atop the fallen wizard's chest. "This creature has befouled our lands and our hunt. What say you... Johtaja?"

The Volvar removed her ornate robes and spit on her hands. “You speak the truth, Grishtok,” she said. “Its crimes are punishable by death.”

The wizard stirred. “No... t-the M-Ministry...” he gurgled.

“I see no Ministry here,” Grishtok growled.

“These lands are not part of the world of wizards,” the Volvar agreed.

The wizard’s entire body trembled; it was clear to Harry that he was dying. “The D-Dark Lord w-will come for you –”

Grishtok pressed down his foot. “And we will be waiting,” he hissed. Blood gurgled in the wizard’s throat.

Fliptrask knelt before Grishtok at the Guild leader’s beckon, and the Volvar nodded. “Fliptrask, son of Martok, carry out the will of the clans,” Grishtok commanded.

“Reclaim our lands and our hunt, kinsman,” the Volvar added. Fliptrask stood and his massive black sword struck true before the wizard could react. Harry flinched. Ron looked near to spewing up, and Flitwick and the Marquis seemed sombre. Hermione wore a satisfied expression, and that chilled Harry even more than the goblins’ cries.

“The hunt is concluded,” Grishtok announced. “To the reception, and then to the feast!” The announcement was well received, and Master Gralnor and his handlers set about rounding up the crups and caging the jarveys. The Volvar spirited Hermione away before Harry took notice, and he instead found himself in the company of Ron, Flitwick and the Marquis.

“We’re supposed to eat after that?” Ron whispered forcefully.

“We’ll have to eat something, like it or not,” Harry said. “We can’t afford to offend anyone, not now – not after I managed to get the most important goblin in Britain attacked.”

The Marquis cleared his throat. "I do not see the failure, Monsieur Potter," he said. "Mlle. Granger, she has earned the confidences of Madame Volvar... the confidences of the Guild and the clans fall to you... Madame Volvar, she is saying that the goblins will not go to Voldemort, and Grishtok, he is agreeing... the feast, it is an opportunity for our gallant knight errant, Monsieur Weasley... there is no failure to see."

"I quite agree," Flitwick said fervently. "You have powerful allies now, Harry – more powerful than the wizarding community recognises. If we didn't live in interesting times before..." He shook his head and smiled.

"Do we need to let Dumbledore know what's happened?" Harry asked Flitwick.

"There is no need," Flitwick concluded after a few thoughtful moments. "Albus cannot come here, so it can wait until the morrow."

"Then we eat," the Marquis said. "I shall have much to discuss on the morrow with my good friend Albus... much indeed. Come, Monsieur Weasley – I shall, ehh, educate you in the ways of fine cutlery."

Flitwick followed the Marquis and Ron slowly, and Harry remained with him. The professor said nothing for several minutes as they walked, and Harry found that he was grateful for the silence.

"Harry... about Miss Granger..." Flitwick said at last.

"I know... I know..." Harry muttered.

"That was far from a normal response," Flitwick said gently. "She had ample time to consider spells, and she made a disturbingly dark choice. Albus has allowed that Miss Granger had a difficult experience at the hands of the Death Eaters, but this raises a legitimate safety concern."

"She's not a danger," Harry said flatly.

“Oh, I don’t believe Miss Granger will begin slicing open her colleagues,” Flitwick assured him, “but consider the NEWT tuition for Defence as an example. The practical aspects are rather combative, frankly – particularly in the hands of a legitimate instructor such as Marcus. What if - ?”

“I’ll speak to Dumbledore,” Harry said. “Professor Detheridge needs to know...”

Flitwick’s brow tufted. “What is it that he needs to know, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s for Hermione to tell, not me.”

“Fair enough,” Flitwick said. “You’re a good and loyal friend to her, and I will respect that. Now then... let’s not keep Grishtok waiting. There’s quite a lot to build on, in my opinion... that is, of course, if you’re interested in my opinion.”

“I need to keep proper counsel,” Harry said. “What do you think I should do next?”

Flitwick began to put five hundred years of goblin history into context as they walked toward the large manor house at the centre of the hunting ground. As they finally neared the portcullis, Harry asked Flitwick, “Will you please look in on Hermione? I mean, I can’t imagine the Volvar would do anything harmful...”

“I remain concerned about her insistence on referring to Miss Granger as a saattaja,” Flitwick said. “I promise you that I will see to her welfare while we remain here. She is, I believe, in good hands elsewhere.”

“Oh, I forgot! Salamaa!” Harry blurted out.

“Pardon?” Flitwick laughed.

“The horse! I left Salamaa in the meadow –” Harry began.

“Gralnor and the others have taken care of her,” Flitwick assured him. “You’ve had rather enough to be going on about, don’t you think?”



Now then, we haven't much time... there will be a rite performed prior to the meal; it's a rather ancient rite, and usually reserved to the temples. I am not aware whether Professor Binns includes Baldor the Brutal in his lesson plan, but it is important that you know..."

## Chapter Thirty-six

### HARRY'S BLUSTERY DAY

September 19, 1996

"Again, Mr. Potter," Covelli said calmly.

Harry staggered to his feet. "Again?" he croaked.

"Again," she repeated, "but first - what did you learn from the attempt?"

"That I'm hopeless," he bit out. "Maybe we should just give up?"

Covelli shook her head. "To walk down a corridor at Hogwarts or to walk through Hogsmeade, it must be very difficult for you. Your time in the classes, it must be torture. After what was done to you, the choice is stark: either master proper Occlumency or risk insanity."

Harry braced himself. "Again, then," he said.

"Begin the exercise," Covelli told him. "Think of the information to be concealed, then visualize the walls rising... the roof being placed atop them... the bars on the windows... and now... picture the building shimmering... fading... disappearing into nothingness... and there is nothing more to be seen." Her voice held the same soft, slow pitch. "I will begin seeking the information in ten seconds. There is nothing to be seen... remember that there is nothing to be seen..."

The pressure at his temples was softer this time. He didn't want to think about Covelli's mental intrusion because to think about the intrusion endangered the hidden information... but he knew that she knew he was thinking about not thinking about it and that was just as dangerous. She pushed and the building was revealed, and then the pressure mounted. He began to repel her, careful not to fall back on instinctive Legilimency though that would have been so much easier. This was difficult – in its own way it was as brutal as the sessions with

Snape, though Covelli seemed to mean well. When the pressure relented, Harry fell to his knees.

Covelli said nothing while Harry slowly recovered. He felt nothing from her, not a flicker of her true feelings – she had exercised great care since he had crashed through her barriers and accidentally recovered a very dark moment from her past. He was slow to meet her eye.

When he did, she asked very calmly, “Who is she?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry said quickly.

“But for a minor error, I would have believed you,” Covelli said. “Remember that an experienced Legilimens will be an experienced judge of expression as well. Your mind did not betray you; it was your eyes.”

“This is impossible,” sighed Harry.

“If it were impossible, then I would leave you to the madness. You will need to learn what is called a ‘poker face’,” she said. “I learned of this from my former husband. Dumbledore also makes this face well; he should be the one to teach you, I think.”

Harry’s shoulders drooped. “So I’m supposed to block my mind, control my face... how can I do that all at once?”

“You will cross the room one step after the next,” Covelli said. “Repetition is the key. It will become second nature to you, this I promise. From this time forward, I will randomly probe your mind. This may happen in the corridors, it may happen any time that I see you in passing. I may attempt it at a distance, although it is very difficult to accomplish. You will be given no warning.”

“Wait – from a distance? I didn’t even think that was possible! This is so unfair!” Harry protested.

“It is possible but rarely practiced.” Covelli’s expression went cold. “This is necessary, and you will learn to resist me,” she said. “I would

prefer that two Legilimens were regularly testing you, but the creature Dumbledore assigned to teach you was utterly unacceptable. Dumbledore will not assist; he will not enter your mind unless you ask it of him.”

“He said that?” Harry asked.

“You are surprised by this, as you should be,” Covelli said. “It appears that you know Dumbledore better than I knew him in my youth... but perhaps neither of us knows him now.”

“I’ve had a lot of experience with him,” Harry said.

Covelli slowly lowered herself into one of the two armchairs in her office. Harry hadn’t considered that their training might be as exhausting for her as it was for him. She took a handkerchief and dabbed at her forehead. “The memories and emotions that I recover from you are privileged,” she told him. “They will not be discussed with Dumbledore or anyone else but you, not unless you expressly permit me to do this. You are not my patient, however; you are my pupil for this subject. This means that I will not explore these things with you either, unless I feel that they impact upon your training or are of sufficient importance that they must be discussed. So, I ask you again: who is she?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Professor Covelli,” Harry said.

Covelli flinched ever-so-slightly. “My title is ‘Doctor’, Mr. Potter – not ‘Professor’,” she said icily. “Understand this: I will not allow you to antagonise me without consequence. You are also aware that I know you are lying. I press because this must be discussed. Shall I ask once more?”

“It’s not your business, right?” Harry snapped and headed for the door. He tugged hard at the handle, but the door wouldn’t open. After an unexpected squelch, it wouldn’t even move within the frame.

“As you suspect, I already know who she is,” Covelli said quietly, “but I would have preferred that you tell me. At least our distrust is mutual

– we can work with that. Now you will sit down and we will have our discussion – please.”

Harry sat hard enough to make the armchair creak, and tightly crossed his arms. “So you don’t trust me either? Good! Glad to hear it!” he spat. “Since you already know who Heather is, what else am I supposed to tell you?”

“I think that we should discuss your feelings for this girl and I will explain –” she began.

He cut her off, “Discuss? I’m sitting here against my will and you’re being a scold – that’s more Dumbledore’s style, isn’t it?”

“I am nothing like –” She stopped and let out an audible hiss, then continued more quietly, “I am not being a ‘scold’, as you say. We will discuss your feelings for this girl and then I will explain why I believe that she affects you, in particular your Occlumency shield and your emotions. Is this acceptable?”

He refused to uncross his arms. “You must know how I feel; you’re the one who pulled it out of my head. What’s to discuss?”

“I know what you felt in that moment. I do not know how you feel in this moment. Do you understand it yourself, I wonder?” Covelli said slowly.

“Fine. Where do I start?” he snapped.

“How did you meet her? This would be the best place to start, I think,” Covelli said.

She had to draw him out at first. He didn’t want to talk about St. Ebb, not with her. It felt to him like talking to Dumbledore, and he didn’t want Heather to be Dumbledore’s business. Whatever there was between he and Heather – and the longer he talked, the more he knew that Covelli was right about his lack of understanding – it wasn’t anyone else’s business at all. With great reluctance, he gave a spare outline of his time in St. Ebb.

“In this world, you are seen as either demon or saviour. In her world, there were no expectations of you. You had two weeks in which to be something other than your public persona,” said Covelli.

She captured Harry’s full attention with that. He pulled his churning emotions close, and said without feeling, “Fair enough.”

“You say she was avoiding permanence? She is well-known in certain circles. Perhaps she was also temporarily shedding her persona?” Covelli suggested.

Harry thought about how different Heather seemed on the telephone than when they had been together, face to face. “All right,” he mumbled.

“For a person who is well known to the public, it is difficult to create a life or even an identity separate from the public persona,” Covelli said. “This is a matter of control, experience, resources and access. For you, Mr. Potter, there is also personal safety to be considered. These two weeks you describe, they were a meeting between the person you wish to be and the person this Heather wishes to be. Your interactions now, they are of a different character?”

“I’m not seeing her any—” Harry quickly began.

“Do not offer me a lie,” Covelli cut him off. “I know that you have remained in contact with the young lady somehow, and I also know that this has been forbidden in some way. The things I know from your memories and emotions, they are privileged – do you remember this? I know this, and I will not share that knowledge. Your interactions – they are changed?”

“Yes, but there’s still...” Harry trailed off. He didn’t want to lie to her gain – he wasn’t entirely certain whether he could lie to her – but he didn’t want to tell her the truth either.

“I have accessed memories of encounters at a discothèque and on an oceanfront. I have some sense of your feelings at those times,” Covelli said. “Do you feel this now, as you think of her?”

“I don’t know. Every time I’m around her...” Harry hesitated, and then added, “If you know who Heather is... do you know what she can do?”

“Yes,” said Covelli. Harry waited for her to offer something more, but it never came.

“Do you think that’s why I get like this when I’m around her, on account of the Legilimency?” Harry asked.

Covelli let out a soft chuckle and said, “No, I do not.”

“Right, what am I missing here?” Harry fumed.

Covelli shook her head ruefully. “I believe we’re finished for today, and I am certain you do not wish to keep Dumbledore waiting. I am setting you an assignment,” she told him.

“An assignment? You’re not part of my set tuition!” Harry protested.

“I am within my rights, given the tasks that Dumbledore has set for us,” Covelli returned. “You will write a paper explaining the difference between love and lust –”

“Pardon?” Harry blurted out.

“Three pages... excuse me – three feet should be sufficient...” She put on a wicked smirk and Harry shuddered as she continued, “This will be an opportunity to put your Gryffindor house traits to use. The research for this paper will be conducted by speaking at length with six persons of your choosing.”

The blood drained from his cheeks. “You want me to talk to six people about... what sort of assignment is that?”

“One which I have assigned,” Covelli said curtly. “You will complete the assignment no later than tomorrow evening.”

“WHAT? By tomorrow?” Harry shouted. “We don’t even meet on Fridays!”

“You will be off the grounds this weekend, Mr. Potter, and I am aware of your destination. Dumbledore will take responsibility for your security, but I know Keith MacLeish all too well. To meet with him unprepared... this would be a grave mistake. You are in need of competent advice,” she said. Her voice was a bit strangled and he picked up a hint of emotion, painful and conflicted, despite her efforts.

He was surprised that she knew MacLeish, and more surprised that she was willing to help. He thought of Flitwick and the goblins, and suspected that he needed counsel over MacLeish even more than he'd needed it with Grishtok and the Volvar. “I have some... er... there's time Friday, I think...” Harry stammered, still thrown off by the peculiar assignment. He wondered whether he should bring it up with Dumbledore, but guessed that the Headmaster would be more amused than helpful.

“That is amenable. Send me a post with a time of your liking, or use a messaging spell if you have learned one,” she said, her eyes already turned to an open notebook on her desk.

“Love and lust?” Harry muttered as he left Covelli's chambers, his mind already drifting to the lesson upcoming. “What is she on about?”

The students avoided Harry in the corridors now, even the Gryffindors. Monday breakfast had been filled with whispers about the weekend's events. By mid-week the rumours had reached a hysterical pitch. Harry had gone on an unsanctioned hunt for Death Eaters; he had started a brawl at the Leaky Cauldron resulting in at least one death; or he had joined forces with a goblin army to plot the overthrow of the Ministry. Luna hadn't helped matters by telling her Transfiguration class that the last rumour was the most plausible of the three. She had gotten a stiff rebuke from McGonagall for it, to which she had shrugged and then proposed that the Ministry would be well served by a proper coup d'etat. Her further insistence that the coup would best be led by Harry and his army of rampaging graphorns had earned her a detention from Flitwick – it had been ‘for her own good’, he had said. Luna had become absent-minded and peculiar – even by the standards of the previous year – since she had returned to Hogwarts; try as he might, he simply couldn't figure the reason for it.



Harry paid the rumours no mind; he was accustomed to being seen as a demon, as Covelli had put it. At least no one was suggesting that Hermione had slashed open a Death Eater, who had then been allowed to bleed to death by the leaders of the British goblin community. No one accused the goblins of then beheading said Death Eater and sending the head as an owl post to Voldemort, to be immediately followed by high tea and a feast. The truth in this instance was far stranger than a Quibbler headline.

Harry still hadn't had an opportunity to go over the events of the hunt in detail with Flitwick in detail, and he wanted – needed – the professor's insight. Talking about that day with Hermione wasn't an option. Talking to her at all had become a problem. Flitwick had shuffled Hermione to the Hospital Wing for an overnight stay upon returning from the goblin hunt; he had shifted her to private tuition in Charms upon her release. Detheridge had relieved her of practical lessons in Defence, and Harry knew that she hadn't attended Dumbledore's NEWT potions class since the week prior. She was indeed the subject of rumours, but these concerned her sanity.

The former D.A. members were still looking after Hermione, Harry knew, but at a greater distance. Ron and Ginny were the only ones to sit near her at meals. She otherwise avoided them as surely as she avoided him, and she positively snapped at anyone else who drew near. He had tracked her movements through the castle for four days, and was surprised that she had only visited the library once. Most of her week had been spent either atop the Astronomy Tower or in the dungeons.

If he hadn't looked up at the proper moment, Harry would have piled directly into Hermione as he rounded a corner. "Hermione! I –" he started.

She stooped to pick up her book bag. Her hair was a tangled mess and she wouldn't meet his eye. "I've no time right now," she said quickly. "I can't talk to you –"

He bent his knees and lowered his head, and whispered, "Look, if this is about what happened at the hunt, I don't –"

Somehow she still managed to avoid looking at him. "I can't do this right now, Harry. I have to go."

"Happy birthday," he said softly.

She slowly raised her head. "I'm sorry?"

"Happy birthday," he said again, "or at least I think I have it right. This is the 19th, isn't it?"

"Birthday... I'd forgotten, honestly," she said. "Erm... thank you, but I really –"

"Have to go, I know," he finished for her. "I have a gift for you, if that's all right. Oh, and I've a gift to deliver you as well."

She took his hands and said, "Thank you"; there was a subtle tremor in her voice. "I really have to go, or I'll be late for class." She left quickly – it wasn't quite fleeing, but close enough to sting. By the time he reached the Defence classroom, he looked forward to taking it out on Detheridge. He was quite thrown when Tonks met him at the door.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Tonks wasn't put off at all. "It's your dancing lesson today, love – oh, I'm sorry, your 'movement studies'," she laughed.

"Bloody hell," he huffed.

"Even more disappointed than usual, eh? Has someone eaten your treacle this morning?" she said.

"I was looking forward to a duel," Harry grumbled.

Tonks reached toward his face and pinched his cheek before he realised what was happening. "Such a charming lad... I'll be happy to put you arse-over-teakettle when we've finished."

"Fine. Let's dance," he growled.

Tonks led him to a vacant room down the corridor from the Defence classroom. She tapped her wand against a wireless in the corner and a wizard's voice squawked, "It's all tango, all the time!"

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious? I've never heard that before!"

Tonks shrugged. "You just have to coax out what you want. Molly never goes beyond WWN One... my mum either, come to think of it." She sauntered to Harry and waited for him to take the lead.

He was precise, he was determined, and he was angry. After a half hour of charging around the room, Tonks waved him away and silenced the wireless with a quick snap of her wand. "What do you think... we're doing here? Are you... are you trying to kill me?" she panted.

"Good enough? Are we finished here?" Harry asked.

"No, we aren't," Tonks returned. "The point of this is to recognise how a partner moves. Dragging me around in a circle isn't going to do –"

The room went black and then a bright red bolt sliced through the darkness. Harry rolled to one side and Tonks dove in the opposite direction. He could see her for an instant with each successive flash; she was slowly circling toward the source. The attacker spotted her and Tonks barely managed to raise a shield. Harry fired off two quick stunners at the attacker's back, but they were somehow deflected and the second nearly rebounded on him.

Harry reviewed the room in his mind as he dodged a curse. There was no furniture save the small table for the wireless, so there were no objects of any size to banish or levitate. He tried to conjure a spread of cannon shot, but the conjuration failed; nothing he'd ever read had even hinted at an anti-conjuration jinx or anything of the like. With the next spell flash, he spotted an old house banner hanging high above. Tonks shifted to her left and Harry moved to his right. She began to fire a barrage of spells and Harry did the same, adjusting his position to assure that he didn't catch her with any stray

casting; he spied a pattern to her spell choices and began to alternate his from the pattern, hoping to catch the attacker off-guard.

In the midst of the onslaught, the attacker dropped to the floor and simply disappeared. “Lumos!” Harry called out anxiously in hopes of slicing through the unnatural darkness. The room was flooded with incredibly bright light.

Tonks muttered, “Torca ignis... bloody twit!” The wall sconces lit after several flickers, and Harry cancelled his spell. As the tip of his wand dimmed, he saw movement – a familiar sort of rippling in the air. He moved quickly to the left and Tonks circled to the right. With a quick flick of the wrist, he ran a slashing spell across the top of the banner and then propelled it quickly downward. He followed with the strongest stunner he could muster; it singed the fallen banner and drew a yelp from the attacker now shrouded beneath. The attacker fell flat and didn’t move.

“Petrificus totalis,” Harry said. Tonks vanished the banner and Harry tugged away the invisibility cloak beneath, to reveal a rigid and unconscious Bill Weasley.

“I figured it was a set-up,” Harry said. “You were moving too slowly. Besides, if I was really under attack inside the castle, Dumbledore would have had help here within a minute.”

“First off, wish for backup but never count on it. There are a score of things that can come off wrong,” Tonks warned him. “Are you beginning to understand why Aurors learn to dance?”

“I knew where you were going to go next,” Harry recognised.

Tonks nodded. “Exactly. Now... moving on... never hold back! Stunners, Harry? I know that’s not the best you have; Shacklebolt’s given you more than that!”

“Like I said, it was a set-up,” Harry insisted.

“You can’t assume that, not ever,” Tonks said. “As to the spell choices, what in Merlin’s name were you thinking with lumos? The

only reason we weren't both put on our backs is because you cast a bloody lighthouse! I'm still seeing spots!"

Harry shrugged nervously. "I figured that if someone made it go dark, it was for a reason; if you light up the room, then you create a problem."

"Suppose that you light up the room, and an opponent's right behind your partner? There's a green flash, and then you're alone," Tonks fired back. "Did you notice that I backed toward the walls? It's best to have something solid at your back, if nothing else."

"How do you know the walls aren't dangerous? There could be... openings for wands, I suppose? Spikes that pop out – that sort of thing?" Harry ventured.

"None of that's likely, but I suppose you could use proximity wards," Tonks suggested. "We can ask Bill about that. First, I'd like to know what Detheridge is doing with you, because he's surely not teaching you how to fight."

"No, Shackbolt's going to do that. Dumbledore's trying to bring him on; otherwise I'll go to him. With Detheridge, we've focused on healing spells. He's gone over a lot of things, though. It's like Shackbolt, I suppose – you learn a lot just listening," Harry said.

"Healing? You're still taking on Charms with Professor Flitwick, right? He's the one to cover healing," Tonks insisted.

"Not healing charms – healing spells. Detheridge keeps coming back to the difference," Harry explained.

"Healing spells?" Tonks shook her head. "Looks like I need to wake up the genius, eh? Pity... I was so hoping to put him in a tutu first." She cast the enervating charm and Bill abruptly sat up.

"Oi, what sort of stunner was that?" Bill blurted out. He fingered a charred hole in the back of his trousers.

“I’ve got a question for you – a couple, actually – if you can stop rubbing your bum,” Tonks laughed.

Bill scowled in return. “It needs rubbing – that stung!”

Tonks wagged her eyebrows. “Is that an invitation?”

“Not in front of the children, dear!” said Bill with a grin.

Harry crossed his arms. “Seems like the child did all right – who’s the one with a burned bum?”

“Fair point,” Bill chuckled. “A couple of questions, then?”

“You were five minutes early, by the way,” said Tonks. “So, what’s the difference between a healing charm and a healing spell?”

“I was on time by my watch. Healing spells, eh? Well, they’re a sight more powerful than the usual charms,” Bill said, “but most are fairly dangerous. Why? Is this an Auror bit?”

“Harry’s been learning them from Professor Detheridge,” Tonks said.

“Is that so? Which spells?” Bill asked.

“ConsanESCO, medela... focilare...” Harry began. Bill’s brow tufted even as Harry mumbled, “...morioR mora...”

“MorioR mora? That’s... are you serious? He’s called that a ‘healing spell’? It’s... well... it’s rooted in the work of a Babylonian necromancer – terribly dangerous work, that!” thundered Bill.

“Yeah, I can see how it could be dangerous,” Harry agreed. “It’s really complex; very tiring to cast, as well.”

“Tiring? Tiring, he says?” Bill threw up his hands. “You’re expelling part of your life force, more or less – of course it’s tiring!”

“It’s not life force, it’s just energy, and you do get it back –” Harry fired back.

"It isn't just energy, and yes, it comes back if the spell is flawlessly cast," Bill warned.

"Dunno, doesn't sound very useful to me," Tonks said. "If you cast that during a fight, it sounds like you'd be left defenceless."

Bill looked carefully around the room. He cast in quick succession a personal ward, an imperturbable charm and a silent space, then conjured three chairs and motioned for Harry to sit. "Here's the thing, Harry: you need to take more care with Detheridge," he said. "The man's clearly very bright and well qualified for the subject... but there's something dodgy about him."

"He's a Defence professor at Hogwarts; that's dodgy on its own. Do you know how many Defence professors Hogwarts has had in the last thirty-five years?" Tonks asked.

"Why do you know that?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Go on, make a guess," Tonks prodded.

"Thirty-five?" Harry offered.

"Professor Dumbledore told me that no one's repeated since '62, but the answer's forty-one. They don't always finish the year," Tonks said.

"It isn't just the post," Bill said. "Three times now, I swear to you Detheridge didn't know who I was. A couple of other times, he's known things that he couldn't possibly know... um... things that only our mutual friends would know."

"Maybe Dumbledore's talking to him? Maybe he's part of the old crowd?" Harry suggested.

"No, no, I've noticed the same, and it's not just things to do with our, uh, friends," Tonks added. "Sometimes I swear he knows about things before they happen. A couple of people I know at the Ministry are prescient, and it isn't nearly so sharp... and then there's the fact

that he looks different now and again – older, then younger, then older...”

“He does, doesn’t he?” Bill muttered. “It’s sort of like Remus. You don’t suppose...?”

“He’s not a werewolf,” Tonks said. “It is a bit like Remus with all the changes, but we just met the man three weeks ago. I can’t see a pattern to it, can you? Sometimes he seems so worn out, and sometimes I think he could run circles around us.”

“Maybe he’s just sick? I know St. Mungo’s can fix just about anything, but look at Moody...?” Harry offered.

“He’s not entirely right, Harry, and he’s giving you tuition in some very dangerous magic.” Bill shook his head. “I know you’re going to have to learn some dangerous spells in the end, but morior mora? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Dumbledore reviews all the lessons,” Harry pointed out. “He knows what I’m learning.”

“It pains me to say it, but I don’t think that’s good enough any more – not after this summer,” Bill said nervously. “These are your decisions to make, and I don’t want to be like Mum on this. Just promise me that you’ll keep your eyes wide open, right? Be careful, and don’t go off half-cocked if you do see something odd... and don’t just tell Dumbledore, either. I’d like to know about it as well. Tonks feels the same. We’re working with Detheridge too, you know – consider it a matter of safety, if you like?”

“All right... if it makes you feel better,” Harry allowed.

“We’re serious about this, the both of us,” said Tonks. Harry glanced at his watch, and she crooked an eyebrow. “Sorry, are we boring you?” she laughed. “That must mean it’s time for me to knock you senseless.”

“No, no... erm... it’s just that I have this stupid assignment –” Harry began, but stopped himself quickly.



“An assignment? They’re still setting papers for you?” Bill asked.

Harry shook his head. “It’s mostly practical now. Croaker gives a lot of work, but I’m three years behind in Runes.”

“Bill can help you with Runes, you know,” Tonks said.

“Nice of you to offer me up,” Bill groused.

“Anything for you, love,” Tonks smirked. “Is it time to rub your bum yet?” Bill showed the barest hint of a Weasley blush.

Harry hastily rose from the conjured chair. “It’s nothing, really. I’ll take care of it myself –”

“I am willing to pitch in, actually,” Bill assured him. “He must be blazing along if you’re going from nothing to NEWTs; are you beyond elementary aetts?”

“It’s not from Croaker,” Harry muttered. “I’ll just be off...”

Tonks crossed her arms. “What sort of assignment? You seem twitchy over it.”

“Really, it’s nothing – just one of Covelli’s mind games,” Harry insisted, and made to leave.

Bill pursed his lips. “Covelli... she’s the new History professor, right? I didn’t think you were going to sit for History.”

Tonks’s face screwed up in concentration. “She was Hermione’s... hold up... she’s a mind healer. Is she helping you block out You-Know-Who?”

“Use his name,” Harry huffed.

“I understood that Snape was trying to teach you Occlumency last year,” Bill said. “Something of a disaster, that?”

“Quite,” said Harry. “If we’re through here, I really should –”

“So she’s teaching you Occlumency and she set you a paper,” Tonks concluded. “What, struggling with your focus?”

“What would you know about Occlumency?” Harry snapped.

“Only what I picked up in the Auror training on mind magic,” answered Tonks. “I know that it blocks Legilimency, that it uses a focal point and a good deal of concentration... I remember the trainer saying that strong emotions can muck it up...” She stopped abruptly, and then slowly assumed a predatory grin. “Aww, ickle Harry’s having focus problems. This doesn’t have anything to do with emissions, does it?” Harry felt the blood drain from his face.

Bill dropped the charms on the room with a quick slash of his wand. “Out,” he said to Tonks.

“Oi, I was just winding him up!” Tonks pouted.

“Out, Tonks!” Bill demanded. When her grin turned to a frown, he added a quiet, “Please.”

“Wasn’t trying to be upsetting... not too much...” she pouted on her way out.

As soon as the door was again imperturbably sealed, Bill motioned to the chairs. “I recall an embarrassing assignment or two during my Hogwarts days,” he said; “mostly around healing, as I think on it. I don’t know much more about Occlumency than Tonks does, Harry, but I figure that you couldn’t learn it without someone mucking inside your head. That sounds pretty awful to me. Do you want to talk about it?”

Harry really didn’t want to talk about it, but he didn’t know how to get out of the assignment and at least Bill came across as a fair-minded fellow. “Covelli wants three feet on the difference between love and lust,” he blurted out.

Bill's lip twitched. "Wha...? Love and lust... er... I'm not laughing, honestly I'm not..." He covered his face with his hands.

Harry sighed. "It isn't funny, you know? She's serious."

Bill took a deep breath and then let down his hands. "If anyone had set that assignment for me when I was your age, I'd have given myself over to the Giant Squid," he said. "You're supposed to research lust..." He snickered and looked away; Harry heard him mutter, "Oh, thank Merlin I made Tonks leave."

"She... wants me to, um, talk to six people about... oh, this is a nightmare..." Harry stammered. Bill's eyes widened and his jaw dropped; Harry wondered if he'd made the same face when Covelli had given him the assignment.

"'Nightmare' sums it up nicely," Bill said at last. "Do you, er, want me to weigh in on this?"

Harry's throat felt thick. "You aren't going to tell anyone about..." he managed.

Bill frantically shook his head. "Absolutely not! Your life is messy enough, without this getting around! Can you imagine if word got out that you'd been assigned this topic?"

"I've been trying not to imagine it, actually," Harry groaned.

"That's understandable," Bill said. "So... do you want...?"

Harry forced himself to nod.

"This is as awkward for me as it is for you," Bill assured him. "Is that your satchel over there? I suppose you'll want a quill and parchment – you know, notes and such?"

"Notes?" Harry squeaked.

“Like it or not, you’ve a paper to write – a quick incendio afterward, and no one’s the wiser,” Bill said. “Look... I’m trying to be honourable here, you being an unofficial Weasley and all. It could be worse.”

“Worse? It couldn’t possibly be worse!” Harry insisted.

Bill rolled his eyes. “Is that so? Who would you rather be sitting with right now – me or Dumbledore?” he asked. Harry summoned his satchel so quickly that it took all of his Seeking reflexes to catch it.

After twenty minutes, Harry discovered that after a certain point, it simply wasn’t possible to feel any more embarrassed; there was a strange sort of numbness that eventually set in. At first Bill seemed to be heading toward the “Talk” that Harry had heard all about from his schoolmates but had always managed to avoid for himself. Everything drifted significantly from that point onward, and eventually Bill seemed to run out of things to say – at least things he was willing to say to Harry. For his part, Harry had no idea what to do with any of it. He now knew that Tonks was without a doubt seeing Bill; that a girl wasn’t a slag just because she showed some physical interest in a bloke; that there were serious advantages and disadvantages to dating a half-Veela; and that not a few Chilean women had been impressed by Bill’s ability to tie knots in a cherry stem with his tongue.

“That’s all I have,” Bill said at last. “Next week, we’re going over a few ways to make this Covelli woman suffer.” He shuddered. “Horrible assignment, Harry – just horrible.”

“Erm... thanks,” Harry managed.

Bill stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Could you do me a favour? How close an eye is Professor Dumbledore keeping on you?”

“I can go where I want, if that’s what you’re asking?” Harry said.

“You know that Dad is mad for all things Muggle, right? I try not to feed it too much – gives Mum fits – but now and again I like to give him some widgety thing or another,” Bill explained. “Tonks picked up this Muggle wireless for him, with the earpieces and a couple of the

music things... er... the square things made out of the plastics, with the spools inside of them –”

“It sounds like a Walkman,” Harry said; “my cousin Dudley’s had a few of them.”

“Sometimes I forget that you’re Muggle-born for all intents and purposes,” Bill said. “I’ve seen one of these things before, but never gave a thought to picking one up. All you had to do was make for the nearest bodega to find good music in Chile, and there wasn’t time for much other than work in Egypt.”

“So...? You want me to take this Walkman out to St. Ebb?” Harry asked.

Bill nodded. “If you wouldn’t mind? Mum and Dad would love to see you. Dad’s become very fond of you over the years, Harry.”

“I like your Dad,” Harry said. “He’s always gone out of his way for me. Your Mum has, too... it’s just...”

“There’s no need to explain,” Bill said. “While you’re there... you know, Dad managed to take six of us through these sorts of questions. None of us ended up too badly damaged for it.”

Harry thought about how Mr. Weasley had reacted when he’d come across Harry and Heather on the beach – he had been calm and helpful and very understanding. “You think I should talk to him, then?” he confirmed.

“I wouldn’t bring it up around Mum, but yeah... if you can get him free, I think you should,” Bill said. “You can get yourself a decent meal –”

“Hogwarts food is rather good, you know,” Harry pointed out.

“Of course it is, when you actually eat it,” Bill countered. “You’re avoiding the Great Hall as if it were cursed. So... you can get yourself a decent meal, and knock down another one-sixth of this assignment of yours.”

“I’d have to do it tonight. There isn’t even time to send an owl,” Harry said.

Bill laughed. “You don’t honestly think that’s necessary, do you? You could drop in at four o’clock in the morning and Mum would have something whipped up for you by half past. I’ve got the Walkthing in one of my cases; let’s fetch it for you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later, Harry pushed away his third plate of an absurdly heavy midday meal and smiled at Mrs. Weasley. “I couldn’t possibly eat another bite,” he said. “This was wonderful, really.”

Mrs. Weasley beamed at him. “With more notice, I could have managed those treacle tarts that you like so much – not that we mind an unexpected visit, of course! Isn’t that right, Arthur?”

Mr. Weasley set aside his copy of the Daily Prophet. “Don’t mind at all,” he agreed, “and I know it’s been said, but I’ll say it again: we can’t thank you enough for allowing us to stay here through the winter.”

“I could never have left you to those tents,” Harry said earnestly. “It wouldn’t have been right, not after everything you’ve done for me.”

Mrs. Weasley’s hands kept smoothing the tablecloth in the same place, over and over. “Harry dear... we’ve had some rough patches over the summer... things have been said, things that hurt you...”

Harry sighed. “Mrs. Weasley, you don’t need to –”

“Yes, yes, I believe that I do,” she said. “We’ve tried to do right by you, all of us, but somehow... especially of late... I’ve... I’ve...” Mr. Weasley produced a handkerchief and Mrs. Weasley dabbed at her eyes.

“It’s all right, really,” Harry insisted.

Mrs. Weasley took a handful of heaving breaths before she set the handkerchief on her lap. "All I've wanted to do is to keep you happy and safe, all of you... Arthur, the children, you, Hermione – you're all family, as far as we're concerned. Did you know that Hermione sent me a Howler...? Of course you did; I'm sure she told you straight away."

"You haven't hurt me, not really, but you did hurt Hermione," Harry said. "Mr. and Mrs. Granger were very upset over it."

Mrs. Weasley lowered her eyes. "I never meant for that. We're terribly fond of Hermione. She's been like a second daughter to us – and with all these men around, can you blame me for wanting another?" She seemed to expect that Harry would say something; when he didn't, she went on, "So many Muggle-borns live on the edges of our world or leave it altogether. I don't want that to happen to her, Harry. It would devastate Ron and Ginny... it would devastate all of us. Hermione expects to accomplish so much. I... I thought that with her coming of age, it was best that someone soften the blow; you see?"

Harry balled his fists beneath the table. "I'm sure you meant well," he bit out. "Did you know that she thought you were setting her up?"

Mrs. Weasley's brow crinkled. "I'm afraid I don't understand –"

Harry latched on to Covelli's exercises; he took a long slow breath and pulled in his emotions as close as he could manage. "She thought you were planning to make sure she'd receive a... an offer from the right sort of pureblood," he said. "Do you understand now?"

Mrs. Weasley was horror-stricken. "No! I didn't intend that at all – not that I'd have minded in the slightest if Hermione had taken up with Ron – but I never intended... oh, this is dreadful... she'll never forgive me for it..."

"I think that you should give her more credit, Molly," Mr. Weasley said. "She's a bright girl, bright enough to see that you had good intentions. Now... would you rather that I help to clean up, or should Harry and I go for a stroll?"

Mrs. Weasley waved her hands toward the door. "Off with you – picking up after three isn't even a trifle," she sniffed. "Besides, Harry needs to slip you whatever Muggle thing that Bill's sent along." Harry's eyes widened and Mr. Weasley looked away sheepishly. She stood before them and kissed Mr. Weasley on the forehead. "Go ahead – restock your collections if that's what you want. I'm letting up on you, dear, at least until you manage to clutter the entire tower," she laughed. "We should find something for you to do besides puttering around."

"Let's go, Harry – I know when I'm not wanted," Mr. Weasley said with a wink.

"Do come back in before you leave?" Mrs. Weasley said to Harry. "I thought I might send Hermione a note, perhaps a few sweets?" He nodded briskly and followed Mr. Weasley to the courtyard and then the path that led toward the cliffs. Neither said anything; Mr. Weasley seemed deep in thought, and Harry let his irritation disperse in the warm September sun.

When they stopped at the overlook, Mr. Weasley grinned at Harry. "So, what did Bill send along? Give it over, would you?"

Harry could feel Mr. Weasley's curiosity and enthusiasm in the air. He smiled in return and pulled Bill's gift from his knapsack. "It's called a Walkman," he said. "Muggles use it to play music. These things are called cassettes; that's where the music is kept." Harry put in a cassette and pressed the Play button. He was surprised to find that the Walkman had working batteries. "You put this headset over your ears. These buttons make the cassette go forward and back. This one stops it. This little thing here makes it louder or quieter."

"Amazing... simply amazing..." Mr. Weasley muttered. He put on the headset and turned the volume dial far too quickly. "Bloody sodding...!" Harry's brows shot toward his hairline; he quickly reached for the Walkman and set the dial back.

Mr. Weasley nearly tore the headset off. "Er... have to experiment with that later. Now this works by... what, exactly? It doesn't need plugs, does it?"



Harry shook his head. "It runs on batteries. If they wear out, I can get you some more. Plugs will work in the tower, by the way, provided you don't rely on too much magic. It's the same idea as the lights."

Mr. Weasley laughed. "I nearly found that out the hard way... rather unpleasant to admit this, but on our first day here I very nearly set the kitchen on fire. An Ignition spell does rather ugly things to those glass bulbs – did you know that? Ted Tonks has come by a time or two to set us right. I've been a bit afraid to try any of my new electricity plugs, in truth. I think I'll wait on Ted, perhaps see if he and Andromeda might spend a weekend?"

"I can show you how some things work." Harry hesitated for a moment. "I should tell you, though... a lot of the things you used to keep around were broken."

Mr. Weasley sighed. "Tom Granger told me the same. It didn't hurt quite so much to lose it all, knowing that. Harry... if you knew, why did you never say anything to me?"

"Dunno... it would have been strange, me saying it," Harry admitted. "You were happy keeping everything, and I didn't think it was my place."

"Fair enough," Mr. Weasley said, "but no one wants to look a fool. I'd like to think I would have listened to you on this, even when you were twelve. It surprises me more that Hermione said nothing about it, actually. Imagine me with a shed filled with broken things... and here we are, living in a place with wires and plugs and glowing glass lights, and the greengrocer comes to us in one of those... it's called a lorry, right?" He made for the steep path down the cliffs to the beach, and Harry followed. "I've learned more about Muggles in the last few weeks than in twenty-five years on the job," he went on. "You know, the Ministry should be ashamed of Muggle Studies? If they'd commission a Muggle-born to write the texts, they'd... well... of course they won't. It would make wizards that much more interested in Muggles, and we can't have that." He sighed. "I've had a lot of time to think, Harry. I don't pine for my days at the Ministry, I can tell you."

Harry couldn't shake what Mrs. Weasley had said about Hermione's future. "Mr. Weasley, has it ever crossed your mind that maybe I might go back into the Muggle world, you know, when everything's finished?" he asked.

Mr. Weasley slowed his pace. "That would be a tragedy," he said without looking Harry's way. "When V-Voldemort's well and truly gone, you'll have great influence – far greater than you have now. I'd rather it be you guiding affairs of state than a Nott or a Parkinson or someone else from the dark families who always seem to ride out these things. At least the Malfoys are cornered, for once." He stopped altogether. "My family wouldn't fare well if you were to leave, Harry. It would be like losing Per... well, it would be like losing one of our own. I don't expect that would be your only consideration, but bear it in mind."

"I won't stay if Hermione leaves, you know," Harry said. "I won't stand by if she's held back like Mrs. Weasley said."

"When all of this is behind us... if you stand behind her, if you're known to be a good friend, then I imagine that will carry a good deal of weight," Mr. Weasley suggested. "Molly's made a worst-case point. I understand that the goblins have taken a great interest in Hermione; she could exert considerable influence from inside of Gringotts. I don't think she should expect to hold a high Ministry position, Harry – not unless the world changes a good deal – but that won't prevent her from making a difference."

Harry's emotions pulled free for a moment before he could rein them in. "She won't be unhappy with her life, not if I can help it," he promised. "I'd do the same for Ron, you know, or you and Mrs. Weasley –"

"You already have," Mr. Weasley said. "You've really no idea what you've accomplished to this point. That's not a bad thing, it seems to me. You've avoided serious arrogance –"

"Really?" Harry asked. "I know I was impossible this summer..."

“You’re sixteen years old; that earns some latitude,” Mr. Weasley chuckled. “You take your responsibilities seriously, and I admit to being impressed by that. We didn’t know them especially well, but... I believe I’m on solid ground in saying that your father and mother would be proud. Yes, quite proud indeed, I’d say.”

They were both quiet until well after they bared their feet and began to stroll southward across the sand. Mr. Weasley broke the silence. “Bill sent an owl ahead of you. I understand you’ve been given a troubling assignment by one of the professors? He wasn’t very specific, but he suggested that I might bring it up if you kept your head down on the matter.”

Harry’s throat tightened. “Er... sent an owl... trying to be helpful... nice of him, that... yes, very nice... um... you see... it’s just... ehh...”

Mr. Weasley pursed his lips. “I’ve never seen you so tongue-tied. Is it really this awful?”

“Love and lust...” Harry ground out. “She wants three feet on the difference between them.”

“Love and lu –!” Mr. Weasley cleared his throat noisily. “I... I can’t fathom that Minerva would do this to you!”

“It wasn’t her,” Harry said quickly.

“Er... that’s something of a comfort, I suppose...” Mr. Weasley pulled a face. “All right, then... can you take detention instead?”

Harry laughed despite himself and said, “I don’t think that will work.”

Mr. Weasley continued to walk, his hands pensively clasped together behind his back. “Well... well... you’re in quite a spot, eh? I won’t even ask what could have provoked this.”

“You know, you really don’t have to –” Harry began.

“Bill did mention that you weren’t left time to tarry,” Mr. Weasley said, “and I must confess... well, there’s ample evidence that I’m at least

familiar with both..." He stopped when Harry began making faint choking sounds. "I won't go there, Harry – you can take a proper breath now."

"Sorry," Harry muttered.

"No need," said Mr. Weasley. "I remember when the very thought of my parents having those sort of feelings –"

Harry ground his teeth. "You said you weren't going there."

"True enough," Mr. Weasley laughed.

Harry reached down, picked up a small stone, and threw it at the surf. "I can't believe this," he sighed.

"You know, love and lust aren't just about pretty girls," said Mr. Weasley.

"I'm sure that's the idea, though..." Harry sulked.

"So you do have some idea why this assignment came about?" Mr. Weasley snorted. "Well, that's neither here nor there... the point is that there's more than one sort of love. There's more than one sort of lust, as well. Do you think that Molly and I love our children?"

"Of course you do," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley nodded. "And there you are. Parents love their children; there's the love between friends, of course... we even love our familiars and pets. You can write about that, can't you?"

For the first time since the assignment was set, Harry felt a flicker of hope. "That's brilliant," he said, "but... what about... um... lust?"

Mr. Weasley shook his head. "You can say... that name without the slightest flinch, but the word 'lust' stops you flat. There's nothing wrong with a bit of lust; it's good to be enthusiastic. The problem comes when it's carried too far. Cornelius Fudge has a lust for power... so does V-Voldemort, of course."

"I never thought of it that way," Harry admitted.

"I'm not surprised, not after raising six boys," said Mr. Weasley. "Now then, if you really need to pursue this in a different way... er... I am willing to help you. I'd feel terrible if I left you in the lurch -"

"No, honestly!" Harry blurted out. "What I mean is, thank you; I appreciate the ideas..."

"Glad to be of help," Mr. Weasley said.

They both went silent again. Harry needed the release of a long walk and Mr. Weasley kept pace. As Harry slipped on his trainers for the walk back to the tower, Mr. Weasley broke the silence. "Have you thought about what I said to you the last time we were on this beach?" he asked.

"You mean what to do about Heather? It's been on my mind, yes," Harry said hesitantly.

Mr. Weasley waited for Harry to start up the path. "This really is a horrid assignment, Harry – I figure you're miserable right about now. Still... if there's no getting out of it, you may as well put it to good use, right?" he said as they started the climb.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a very uncomfortable hour in the staff commons and an equally unpleasant two hours in the staff reading room, it was perfectly obvious to Harry that he was being avoided. Sprout and McGonagall had made polite excuses; Croaker had glared at him; Marchbanks had harrumphed for two minutes before burying herself in a book older than she was; and Vector had ignored him as obviously as possible.

He sought out Flitwick to see if he might shed some light. The Charms professor had very energetically begged off, but had then insisted that he would happily see Harry the following evening. It was the particular timing that set Harry to thinking, and he didn't care for

the conclusion. They all know about the bloody assignment! he realised, and he began to concoct increasingly diabolical ways of hexing Covelli.

Harry was still grumbling to himself when he came upon Luna Lovegood. She planted herself directly in his path. "Hello, Harry; you're having a perfectly miserable day," she sing-songed; her hand twirled absently at long hair that was no longer there.

"Hello, Luna," he sighed. "I haven't a graphorn army, you know, and I'm not putting on a coup."

"Graphorns... ooh; I didn't say graphorns, did I? I meant flugelhorns, of course," she said vacantly.

Harry's eyes involuntarily crossed. "Flugelhorns? Erm... I'm not sure, but I think you play a flugelhorn?" Luna's eyes were fixed on a point a foot above Harry's left shoulder. "Luna...?"

Her eyes cleared for a moment. "I'm sorry," she said; "it was rude of me to carry on two conversations at once. So, what can I help you with?"

"Help me with...? You're the one who stepped in front of me," Harry pointed out, "not that I'm unhappy to see you. Did you want something?"

"Want something? Oh... I thought you might need help with your assignment," she said absently.

"What do you know about that?" Harry gasped.

"I was walking the grounds, and the centaurs were having a chortle over it," Luna told him.

Harry desperately hoped that she was being fanciful. "I... I think I can finish it on my own, thank you," he managed.

She fixed him with an unblinking stare; her pupils contracted into pinpoints. "Lust dies. Love does not," she said.

Harry couldn't look into her eyes any longer. "Er... I don't know if I can get three feet from that, but... thank you?"

"It's the only truth there is on the matter," she said with a shrug. "If you write large, the truth can fill six inches. I could explain the mating habits of a Will 'o the Crisp for you... that could take up six feet, easily." Her eyes drifted off toward the end of the corridor and she shuddered.

"What is it? Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"It will pass," Luna said. "You were about to ask me something?"

"I was, actually..." Harry admitted. "Um... it's like this... when we were in St. Ebb, you were so... well... normal? What's happened to you?"

"I have thestrals in my belfry from fall to spring," Luna laughed.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Fall to spring... are you... are you saying that Hogwarts does this to you?"

"Everything dreams, Harry – the students, the professors, the ghosts, the owls, the portraits... even the castle dreams," she sang out, and then said cheerily, "Be seeing you!" and skipped off before he could get in a word. He couldn't begin to imagine what Luna was trying to say; it was much more confusing than her dottiness from the year prior.

He considered a return to the staff commons and a confrontation with each professor until the truth came out, but decided instead to kill Covelli in her sleep and thus be over and done with it. As he continued along the corridor, it occurred to him that killing her in her sleep was not only too kind, but would be thoroughly unsatisfying. He clenched and unclenched his fists for the rest of the walk to Dumbledore's chambers.

Dumbledore's gargoyle Gareth was civil, almost stately, in stark contrast to Cyril and Godfrey who guarded the staff commons. It still

startled Harry when any of the gargoyles spoke to him. They didn't speak to or in the presence of students – he'd had no idea until the end of August that they spoke at all. It was another measure that he was now different than before.

"The Headmaster is indisposed," the gargoyle said in his slow and grave way.

Harry's temper was in full flush. "Indisposed, is he? Well, he needs to be... uh... disposed, right now!"

"I shall enquire," Gareth said. "Know that disposed is not the opposite of indisposed... and would that they taught the Queen's English in this castle." Even the gargoyles are against me, Harry thought.

Several minutes later, the gargoyle allowed the door to open without comment. Harry dashed up the stairs. Dumbledore was seated behind his massive desk and a stack of papers. He had a snifter of something reddish in one hand and a quill in the other that he set down as Harry entered. "Oh, dear... that is the sort of expression one wears following a great tragedy," the Headmaster said. "Have a seat, would you?"

"I'll stand, thank you," Harry said.

Dumbledore set down his glass. "Good gracious, Harry, should I be concerned? What could have happened—?"

Harry held up his hand. "Covelli set me an assignment – a nasty bit of work," he said. "I don't suppose you know anything about that?"

Dumbledore held an impassive face. "An assignment? Is that so?"

Still, Harry spotted the barest hint of a twinkle in Dumbledore's eye. "I'm in a foul mood right now, Professor, so please don't draw this out. Either Covelli spread the word or you did. Which is it?"

"I see you've found me out," Dumbledore said with an impish grin. "It is customary for the Headmaster to prank each member of staff at the



commencement of each new term... except for Mr. Filch, who possesses no sense of humour whatever.”

“A prank...?” Harry pushed his feelings down as deeply as he could manage. “You could have added a sleeve to all of my robes, or turned me purple, or... or transfigured me into a newt, but... this?” He lost his reserve, and added with a catch in his throat, “How could you?”

“You can trust that the staff will stop avoiding you after tomorrow, and I assure you that neither Mr. Filch nor Severus was given any knowledge whatever,” said Dumbledore calmly.

“You honestly think this will stop tomorrow? They must think I’m some sort of... of... pervert!” Harry fumed.

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. “Nonsense, Harry. Why ever would they think that?”

“They have to wonder why I’d be stuck with an assignment like this one!” Harry railed. “They have to think there’s something wrong with me or that I did something –”

“Ah, I see,” Dumbledore said. He took a sip of his red beverage before he went on, “In order for that to be the case, the staff would have to know what the assignment was.”

Harry was left flat-footed. “Wha...?”

“The staff was told that I’d set you to ask them particularly embarrassing questions,” Dumbledore laughed. “Having been pranked a number of times, they not only understood but were most willing to be complicit. I dare say that Filius was best at putting on, wouldn’t you agree?”

Harry’s mouth opened and closed silently several times before he forced out, “Not funny, not in the slightest.”

Dumbledore continued to chuckle. “Is that so? I found it quite amusing – in fact, I find it quite amusing even now.”

"You've a dodgy sense of humour, then!" growled Harry.

"So I have been told," Dumbledore agreed.

"I'm not sure this isn't even worse than I thought! They didn't know what the question was, so they could have imagined something even worse than the assignment – not that there could possibly be anything worse!" complained Harry.

"No one has thought poorly of you," Dumbledore insisted. "It's more likely that they've thought poorly of me for setting you some sort of horrid question. Lemon sherbet?"

"No! I don't want a lemon sherbet!" Harry snapped. "I can't believe that you... today was enough of a nightmare without this!"

Dumbledore set aside his snifter and steepled his fingers. "I should have anticipated your sensitivities, having once been of your age and station. There was no intention on my part to upset you so. I offer you a sincere apology, Harry."

"I suppose I'll accept it," Harry said reluctantly.

"Your anger would be well and truly justified had I disclosed the terms of the assignment, or if those terms had somehow reached the students," offered Dumbledore.

Harry's inclination toward accepting the apology quickly waned. "So how did Luna Lovegood find out what Covelli set me?"

Dumbledore was noticeably startled. "Miss Lovegood, you say? Oh dear... I do hope that this has gone no further – that was certainly not my intention –"

"- and a fat lot of good that did!" Harry cut in.

"I did not share the particulars with the staff, nor did I share anything of any sort with Miss Lovegood... yet I cannot imagine that Lucia is

responsible. Such petty cruelty is beneath her,” Dumbledore said firmly.

“Is it really?” Harry sneered.

“Have problems arisen between the two of you? You can ill afford more diversions or delays in your training, and certainly where Occlumency is concerned,” said Dumbledore.

Harry grumbled, “She’s not as bad as Snape, if that’s what you mean.”

Dumbledore rubbed at his eyes and let forth a long sigh. “We will have too little time as it is, you and I, without expending it on rancor,” he said.

“Then don’t prank me again. Ever,” Harry said flatly.

“This has been quite the misadventure, I see,” Dumbledore said sadly. “I had no intention of angering or upsetting you beyond the mild upset one associates with a prank. Regrettably, circumstances often overwhelm intentions. I had no intention of carrying two apprentices at the same time, for example, but... yes?”

Harry was stunned. “Two apprentices? But... who else?” he blurted out.

“Lucia did not tell you? It seems that her embarrassment runs deeply, indeed.” Dumbledore directed Harry to a chintz armchair, and he willingly sat. “Lucia invoked some very powerful and very old magic long ago,” the Headmaster went on. “It was necessary as she assisted me in vanquishing Grindelwald. That invocation came at a price. In the same way as the protections cast upon you imposed certain timing on your stays with the Dursleys, so this magic imposed a time of service upon Lucia. No formal vows or oaths of apprenticeship were ever sworn – just as with you – but she remained my apprentice for all intents and purposes, and that relationship was rejoined simply by entering this castle. I did not know that this would happen, or I would not have asked her to return. I would not have wished her to be bound here against her will.”

“So that’s why she won’t go by ‘Professor’?” Harry asked, still dumbfounded.

“She prefers the title ‘Doctor’ in any case,” said Dumbledore, “but it is not acceptable for an apprentice to adopt the title of ‘Professor’, even if she is a fully qualified instructor.”

“And what about ‘bound’? What do you mean?” Harry didn’t like the sound of it, whatever it meant.

“Yes, Harry – bound. Lucia is bound in service to Hogwarts for another eight months; this was the remaining term of her apprenticeship,” Dumbledore told him. “Having triggered the binding by her return, she can only leave the confines of the castle for brief periods – a few days at most – without extending that term. I have been unable to negate the binding, despite considerable effort. It is a testimony to the magic involved that the connection remains so powerful after fifty years.”

“It is just like the Dursley’s, isn’t it? Well... at least it’s Hogwarts, I suppose. At least she’s not trapped in a house with Uncle Vernon,” Harry pointed out.

“A cage is a cage, however large it may be,” Dumbledore returned. “I wish that you had not endured the Dursleys and I wish that Lucia was free to come and go from a place that she does not hold fondly. Now then...” With a flick of his wand, a silvery phoenix raced across the study and down the stairwell. “I expect that Lucia will join us within the hour.”

“Perfect! There are so many things I’d like to say to her...” Harry said with relish.

“Keep in mind that it was I who pranked you. If you wish to be angry, please direct it toward me,” said Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. “She set the assignment in the first place.”

"You will have opportunity to air your anger, though I do hold that some of it is misdirected," Dumbledore assured him. "In the mean time, I would like you to speak of your Occlumency training."

Harry begrudgingly recounted his sessions, and admitted that he had made progress. "We don't trust each other, not really, but until this morning I'd have said that things were coming along."

"Your description and the reports from Lucia are very similar," said Dumbledore. "I am pleased that your abilities are developing. I wish the same could be said about the relationship between apprentices."

Harry sat in silence for a while, before he quietly said, "The more she teaches me, the more I worry about Heather."

"Miss Magruder? Has something happened of which I am unaware?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry related a portion of what Heather had said on the beach about her experience at Hogwarts and about the way that the world seemed to be pressing in upon her now. "I know I've asked it before, but is it possible that Snape did to her the same as he did to me?" he finished.

Dumbledore gave his beard a thoughtful stroking. "Efforts were made to teach her Occlumency," he said slowly; it was obvious that he was choosing his words. "Those efforts were not fruitful, but she did not disclose her experiences in the castle... very curious, indeed. Your concerns may be warranted. May I contact Remus? I would prefer not to wait, but I shall defer to you."

Harry swallowed audibly. "What... do you mean to contact him now? Erm... are you going to tell him that this came from me? I mean, it might not be for the best..."

"What would you have me say, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "It has been three weeks since she left us. By what other means would we know of her circumstances?"

Harry took a deep breath, and then set his jaw. "Sod it. If she needs help, I won't stand in the way. Go ahead... Floo him." He fidgeted for

a moment, but then added, "I'll speak to him myself." Dumbledore's twinkle made an appearance, and Harry resisted an impulse to poke the Headmaster's eyes.

"I am unable to contact Remus by Floo; however... Fawkes, would you be so kind?" Dumbledore let fly a second silvery phoenix, and Fawkes sang a single trill before giving chase.

While they waited, Harry asked Dumbledore about Detheridge's tuition. He managed to work in Bill's concerns without giving up the source. The Headmaster took a long time to answer and he chose his words carefully. "Marcus understands the importance of his instruction as well as anyone who has ever taught at Hogwarts," he said.

"You said you wouldn't keep things from me," Harry warned.

"I have made promises to Marcus regarding the details of his past, present and future," Dumbledore said. "He is a cautious man, as he should be. If you wish to know more, you must ask him directly."

Fawkes reappeared just then with Remus Lupin in tow. Lupin was rumpled and particularly weary-looking. "You needed to see me, Albus?" he croaked; when he caught sight of Harry, he stammered, "Hello! I... er... never expected..." He stopped and sniffed. "What's happened?" he demanded. "Something's happened, I know it!" Harry tried to stand by way of greeting but was assaulted by a flood of raw emotions.

"Some concerns have been expressed that impact upon you, Remus," said Dumbledore. He nodded at Harry, and added, "The floor is yours."

Harry put his hands to his temples. "Er... it's about Heather –"

"What? What's happened? Where is she?" Lupin growled. "Did someone find out... has there been an attack? Why are we standing here when we could –?" Dumbledore put his hand on Lupin's shoulder and the werewolf quieted, though he was still panting.

There wasn't so much anger as guilt and hurt and shame – it was simply raw, unrestrained. Harry recovered himself just enough to blurt, "When is the full moon?" He slid out of his chair and fell to his knees before he could muster one of Covelli's techniques.

Remus crossed the room in an instant. "What on Earth...? Albus, I understood you were teaching him to sort this out!" he snarled.

"He is progressing," Dumbledore said, "but your feelings are overwhelming, Remus – even I can feel them. I know it is difficult, but please settle yourself."

"Heather... she's... she's your cub... I didn't get that... didn't understand..." Harry bit out against the onslaught. "Should have said that... straight away..." He tried to shake off the overwhelming sense of protectiveness that washed over him, but there was a second wave of it.

"I'm sorry, Harry" Lupin said quietly, "I didn't set out to hurt you. I'm so sorry."

"Stop, just stop..." Harry managed. His defences almost fell a third time when Lupin knelt next to him and pulled him into an awkward half-hug.

"All right... now... about Heather – ?" Lupin started anxiously.

Dumbledore made Lupin move off. "You were asked to settle yourself," the Headmaster said firmly. "Miss Magruder is in no immediate danger." A small bar of chocolate appeared in Harry's hand.

Harry stayed on his knees, eyes closed, as he found his centre and imagined a wall. His forehead was damp from the struggle by the time he opened his eyes. "I... I thought I was catching on to this," he sighed.

"You are doubtless 'catching on', as you say," Dumbledore assured him. "Remus is a good man, a good man indeed, but he is also a sentient magical creature. To answer your earlier question, the full

moon rises tomorrow afternoon. As I said, even I could feel what you felt.”

Lupin slumped into a hastily conjured chair. His breaths were long and slow and forced. “You’ve never spoken of this before, Albus. I had no idea...”

“With few exceptions, this phenomenon is exclusive to a Legilimens,” explained Dumbledore, “and passive Occlumency dulls the sense of presence.”

“Is this why Severus has always disliked me so?” Lupin wondered aloud.

“It may contribute to his animosity but you are aware of Severus’s reasoning, however flawed it may be,” Dumbledore said. He extended a hand to Harry. “Harry, you will fare better seated than kneeling upon a stone floor.”

Harry stumbled back into his armchair. “What was that?” he said. “It was... I don’t know... it was so out of control...”

“Breathe easily, Harry. You felt Remus’s uncontrolled aspect,” Dumbledore said. “The wolf was upon you.”

Lupin’s voice cracked. “That’s the state of my life once every four weeks. I’m truly sorry, Harry – if I’d understood what you were experiencing... it’s safe to say that I would have handled many things differently...”

“The wolf...” Harry murmured. “The wolf...?” His eyes widened. “The Wolf! But... but... she isn’t a werewolf, I mean, we know that much... I don’t understand it – how could...?” Remus edged forward in his chair, but this time Harry had control of his senses.

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoroughly before he said, “I gather that the ‘she’ in question is Miss Magruder? Explain yourself, please.”

“I... I’m trying to figure how much I have to tell. It’s private, and I know what it means to have that violated,” Harry protested.



The Headmaster's gaze was penetrating, though Harry didn't feel any sort of probing. "Is this a matter of Miss Magruder's personal safety?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry relented. "It was in her memories, see? There's something always there, in her mind – The Wolf, she calls it. When she uses Legilimency, it comes as a wolf. She even left scratches on Snape when she forced him out at the club – real scratches."

"Scratches... do you mean to say that he attacked Heather?" Lupin shouted.

"He complimented her for it," said Harry. "He was impressed."

"Severus said nothing of this," Dumbledore murmured. "What you describe should not be possible..."

Lupin bared his teeth; even in human form, it was a frightening sight. "I'm going to pay Severus a visit – TOMORROW NIGHT!" he roared.

"You will do nothing of the kind," Dumbledore said calmly. He summoned a dark green bottle and an empty snifter from his desk. Harry thought the liquid inside smelled faintly of wood and grass. The Headmaster poured the snifter half-full and held it out to Lupin.

"Now is not the time –" Lupin started.

Dumbledore stopped him with a look. "I had planned to visit you later this evening, but yes, I believe it is precisely the time."

Lupin took it and raised it to his nose. "It smells... how odd... it's not Wolfsbane Potion, of course – too aromatic – but there's a hint of the scent... what is this?"

"It is from the cellars of an old friend. He tells me that a mutual acquaintance used it long ago to 'temper the humour of werewolves'. This is absinthe," Dumbledore explained.

The snifter shook in Lupin's nervous grasp. "Absinthe? But – but that's been banned by wizards and Muggles alike! It's lethal, isn't it? I may as well take the Wolfsbane potion and off myself properly!"

Dumbledore shook his head and smiled faintly. "A handful died from absinthe a century ago, and those deaths were as a result of improper distillation. Properly prepared, this is no more deadly than Firewhiskey – be it to Muggles or to magical folk. The scent you identified is wormwood. Now, this particular bottle dates to the year of my birth. I have made it my occasion to sample it on my birthday each year, but you are in more need of it than I. Raise your glass, Remus. It is not Wolfsbane Potion, but it may ease your pain," he said.

Lupin looked dubious, but he slowly lifted the snifter and sipped. "It certainly tastes better than the potion," he allowed.

"I suggest that you drink it down," Dumbledore said.

Lupin's foot twitched oddly. "Bottoms up, then," he said and then drank the remaining absinthe in a single swallow. "That's peculiar..." he mumbled just before his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Steady him," Dumbledore commanded, and Harry bolted to Lupin's side. The werewolf shuddered and his hands shook for most of a minute before he went slack in his chair.

Dumbledore waved his wand in odd fashion and muttered approvingly at the blue light that shone around Lupin's head. "A better result than I had imagined, Harry," he said. "He will not be lucid at the full moon, but I expect that he will obtain more control of the days preceding and following the transformation. Enervate."

Lupin took in an exaggerated breath and sat up, glassy-eyed. "Goodness..." he mumbled.

"Do take a moment, Remus," Dumbledore said. "My friend suggested that this might possibly happen. The combination of wormwood and angelica causes the absinthe to react differently to your essence than would be the case for, say, Harry or myself."

"I feel... I... I feel myself again," Remus said slowly. "Good Lord, I was raving, wasn't I?"

"I do not pretend to understand what you experience each month, Remus. If this burden could be lifted from you, I would do so without hesitation," said Dumbledore. "As it stands, my friend has agreed to re-examine the Wolfsbane Potion in order to see if your sensitivities can be alleviated. He is the greatest intuitive Potions Master I have ever known." He turned to Harry. "I have also asked him to consider taking up the Potions position here at Hogwarts, at least for the balance of this year. If he agrees, then I will give over responsibility for your tuition in that subject."

"I'm in control, Albus, but don't mistake that for happiness or satisfaction," said Lupin.

Harry nodded in agreement; he would not be deterred any longer. "So, did Snape turn Heather into a weapon, or not?" he asked. Lupin shifted uneasily in his chair. There was another wave of protectiveness, but Harry found it far easier to weather.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and released a heavy sigh. "I must confer with Lucia on this matter. Our efforts in this matter were undertaken without key information, and Severus's omissions merit concern."

Remus gripped the arms of his chair so firmly that the wood creaked. "Concern? Concern? We were concerned about Heather going mad, and it's now suggested that dear old Severus somehow cocked up the whole business? To hell with control! If this is true, Albus – if we find out with certainty that it's true – I swear to you... tomorrow night I pay a visit – tomorrow night, and the consequences be damned!"

"Calm yourself – let the absinthe do its work," Dumbledore said. "We will determine what has happened and take steps to remedy it."

Harry stared boldly at the Headmaster and said, "If Snape did to her what he did to me, I'll force him outside the gates. I wonder how long it would take the Death Eaters to collect him."

"We require Lucia's expertise," Dumbledore said. "She was unable to participate in Miss Magruder's examination and instruction, though I did consult with her at the time. It is clear that critical information was withheld." He looked to the portrait wall. "Ethelred, has Dr. Covelli left the History classroom?"

A portrait of an ancient wizard wrapped in ermine robes snapped to attention. The wizard left his frame for a few moments. Upon his return, he reported, "Madam has retired to her study, in the company of a student – a fair young maiden with locks of brown. I regret to say that Madam spied me as I entered."

Dumbledore released another silvery phoenix. "I expect that she will find this second message more provocative," he said. "If not, then I shall dispatch Fawkes to collect her."

"I'd be happy to collect her. Please allow me," Harry said with malice.

"It would be best if she were collected intact," Dumbledore deadpanned. Harry grunted, and then the study went silent until Covelli reached the top of the steps.

"What has happened, Albus?" she asked briskly.

Harry stood and glared at her. "Snape's done something terrible to my friend, that's what... oh, and I hate you." Lupin crooked an eyebrow at the last.

Covelli took two long, calming breaths before speaking. "I presume we speak of the same young lady as this morning?" She turned to Lupin. "We have not been introduced. I am Lucia Covelli, instructor for the History of Magic and... and Albus's apprentice."

Confusion played across Lupin's face for a moment before he rose and took her hand. "I'm Remus Lupin," he said. "Heather Magruder is my daughter, and Harry's parents were among my closest friends at school."

“Remus taught Defence here at Hogwarts three years ago,” Dumbledore added, “and it is indeed Miss Magruder of whom Harry speaks. It seems that when you were consulted, key information about the nature of her ability was absent, and perhaps withheld.”

Covelli turned to Harry. “There is more than that which I have seen?”

“How am I supposed to know what you have and haven’t seen?” Harry shot back.

“Did the young lady mislead you, Albus?” Covelli asked.

“It appears that we underestimated Miss Magruder’s desire to end her time with us,” said Dumbledore.

“It was awful for her —” Harry started without thinking.

“Explain, please,” Covelli interrupted.

Harry winced. “Er... what I mean is... she didn’t want to... um...”

Lupin looked to him with heavy eyes. “Harry, I know that you’ve continued to speak with Heather since that night; it was obvious from the start. I’m not stupid, you know? I suspect you’ve seen each other as well. If you truly care about her... if you know anything that would be helpful, anything at all... please...”

Harry began to retell Heather’s description of her time at Hogwarts, which led to her difficulty in managing the emotions around her, which in turn led to Heather’s defence against Snape’s Legilimency attack at Cabaret Molière. Lupin’s face became more ashen with each revelation. Dumbledore listened intently. Covelli wouldn’t meet Harry’s eye.

When Harry finished, Covelli said, “If you wish my involvement, Albus, then I must speak with the girl. Her reaction to magic, it brings to mind similar reactions of non-magical patients over the years. Would someone explain the meaning of the wolf, please?”

Lupin's shoulders hunched and his eyes fell to the floor. "You see, Madam Covelli –"

"'Doctor' Covelli is preferred to 'Madam'," said Covelli, "but I am called Lucia by my peers. Please consider yourself as such."

"Remus, if you prefer that I..." Dumbledore began to offer.

Lupin shook his head. "No, I've borne it for over thirty years. I'm well aware of what I am."

Covelli's eyes widened. "Licantropo..." she murmured.

"Yes, I carry the lycanthropic curse. I am a werewolf," Lupin confirmed sadly, "and thus I understand why you are unwilling to offer any further assistance."

"No! No, you misunderstand!" Covelli said quickly. "I am... I am simply taken by surprise... and I am very confused. How is it that the young lady is your daughter? You married her mother, yes?"

"Actually, no," Lupin said.

"Miss Magruder is Remus's daughter by birth," Dumbledore explained.

Harry was surprised and not a little pleased to see Covelli taken aback. "But... but... how is that... how?" she spluttered.

Remus frowned. "In the usual way, Doctor," he said briskly.

"I... had understood that lycanthropes could not produce or bear offspring to term," Covelli said. "As I recall it, the literature states –"

"The literature is wrong in this instance." Dumbledore smiled. "I knew of three prior cases where a werewolf had sired a child. The common factor had not occurred to me until just now. In those cases and in the case of Remus, the mother of the child was a Muggle."

Covelli raised one hand to her mouth and her fingers tapped at her lips. Her eyes narrowed, and Harry was reminded of Hermione's

expression when she picked her way through a problem. "In these earlier cases, did the offspring have magic or did they not?"

"I do not know," Dumbledore admitted. "That is an interesting question, most interesting indeed."

"This Heather, she is not a lycanthrope herself?" Covelli asked. "You would of course have told me this was the case, Albus."

"No, thank Merlin," Lupin said.

"Yet the talent manifests as a wolf..." Covelli said. "The other cases may be important."

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall make enquiries. As to arranging a meeting between yourself and Miss Magruder... Remus?"

"There's no earthly way it could take place before Monday," Lupin said. "Shona could never persuade her to do it prior to the performance. Is it... is it safe to wait?"

"There is no reason to believe otherwise," Dumbledore said.

"We must know what has and has not been done. I will speak to the brewer," Covelli spat.

Dumbledore frowned. "In future, please refer to Severus by name. Despite his actions and circumstances, he does still reside within these walls and certain decorum is expected."

"You still offer a defence, but the brewer has lost the right to a name. The brewer is a creature, nothing more," Covelli said coldly. For an instant, Harry felt the same darkness that had filled Covelli's violent memory from the war with Grindelwald.

Dumbledore's eyes bored into her. "You will not confer with Severus alone. I will be present. Is that understood?"

Covelli noticeably shuddered. "I understand and will comply," she said bitterly, "but you will not compel me to name something so

undeserving – I refuse.” Harry was startled by the exchange, both by Dumbledore’s command and by Covelli’s acceptance of it; Lupin appeared equally startled.

“So be it,” said Dumbledore, and he turned his attention to Lupin. “Am I to assume that Miss Magruder’s unavailability is due to Keith MacLeish’s upcoming soiree? He has extended an invitation to me for the entertainment and a reception following. I dare say that everyone of standing in Britain has been invited.”

Lupin seemed to shake off the exchange between Covelli and Dumbledore. “Shona’s invited, and intends to take me as her guest,” he said. “I haven’t agreed to it at all; my presence would be difficult to explain and I don’t want to take any more unnecessary chances.”

“I can’t imagine many from the Ministry making an appearance, especially Fudge,” Harry said.

“Oh, indeed he will. I did say everyone of standing in Britain, Harry. Although I understand that Her Majesty possesses a long memory for public slights and doubtless would refuse to appear in the same building as Miss Magruder, it is possible that someone will represent the Royal Family,” said Dumbledore.

“You’re having me on!” Harry said.

“I only wish that were true,” Dumbledore said. “The Muggle Prime Minister will be attending, and Cornelius is not one to be upstaged. This is a significant event, Harry, in addition to being an untenable secrecy and security risk.”

“It’s sheer madness,” Lupin agreed. “If I could pull Heather free of it, I’d do so in an instant.”

“The Ministry has made its bed and now we must all lie in it,” Dumbledore continued. “The rest of the world will be watching us and many will be hoping for a debacle. Mr. MacLeish has been a masterful manipulator in all of this. If nothing else, I do hope that we shall gain a clearer view of his true aims. It seems that he does nothing by halves.”



“Truer words have not been spoken,” Covelli said. “I have asked Mr. Potter to meet with me tomorrow in advance of meeting –”

Spending an extra minute with Covelli was simply too much after the events of the day; Harry’s temper blossomed at the thought. “I’ve changed my mind on that! I’d rather – I’d rather – oh, sod it, I’d rather spend tomorrow with a Dementor!”

“That is completely uncalled for, Harry,” Dumbledore scolded.

“Uncalled for?” Harry gritted his teeth. “With all due respect, Headmaster, you’re not the one stuck with this... this... assignment...”

“I realise that this assignment lies outside your zone of comfort, Mr. Potter –” Covelli began.

Harry shouted, “Outside of my zone of comfort? Where do you get off, you effin’ –”

“Harry! Enough!” Dumbledore cut him off. Lupin’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Covelli went on as though nothing had been said. “– and I am sympathetic to your prior experiences – believe me when I say this – but I stand by my reasoning in the selection of the topic,” Covelli said. Harry crossed his arms tightly and his fists balled. Breathe, just breathe, he thought.

“Albus, I need a word with Harry – now, please,” Lupin said.

Dumbledore gestured at the door that led into his private library. “Please avail yourselves of the room beyond. Lucia and I will address student-related matters.”

“You have that accursed twinkle in your eye, Albus,” Covelli said. “What have you done?”

"A great many things," Dumbledore sighed as Harry entered the library.

Lupin closed the door as soon as he and Harry passed through it. "I won't have this woman involve herself in Heather's situation until someone explains to me what in Merlin's name that was all about. You can be rather intemperate, Harry, but that's not how this feels to me. You've been wronged, I think, and I don't like it."

Harry felt a flicker of Lupin's protectiveness again, and it was even clearer to him than before that the feeling didn't stop with Shona and Heather. He let himself breathe in and out and forced himself to pull back from his own anger. "Erm... thank you for that, but the assignment is my problem. I don't like Covelli, not in the slightest," he said at last, "but she's the proper one to sort this out."

Lupin hesitated, and then said, "Your word on this is enough for me... but I can't help wondering what sort of assignment could cause you to be so agitated?"

"This isn't something that I can talk through with you," Harry said seriously.

Lupin looked baffled. "Come again? It's not as though she has you revising the twelve ways to kill a werewolf with silver implements. Short of that, I can't see any school topic we couldn't touch upon – if you want to, that is."

Harry paced the room, faster and angrier with each crossing. Lupin finally stepped into his path and said, "That's quite enough stomping about!"

No matter how much he wanted to hold it back, Harry couldn't manage it anymore. "Love and lust – she's making me write three feet on the difference between them, and it's to be based on discussing the point with six people... and then Luna found out about it somehow and Dumbledore pranked me over it and... there! Satisfied?"

The blood drained from Lupin's face. "That's... disturbing..." he managed.

"I told you! I wanted to keep quiet, but you wouldn't let it go," said Harry.

Lupin walked unsteadily to the nearest chair. "No... no... it's right that I know when something's troubling you... and this certainly qualifies... is there water in here? I need water..." He radiated confusion and frustration and such a jumble of other emotions that Harry felt the need to sit as well.

Harry conjured a rough-hewn glass of water and held it out to Lupin. "It's been a long day," he said.

Lupin downed half the glass immediately. "I imagine so," he acknowledged. "This Dr. Covelli... she must have had a reason for setting an assignment like this. Did you provoke her, or is she merely as abrasive as she seems?"

"She saw some things during our Occlumency sessions," said Harry

Lupin rubbed at his temples. "Who have you spoken with, may I ask?" he asked.

"Mr. Weasley and Bill Weasley, so far... and Luna, I suppose," Harry answered.

"Those are, uh, interesting choices," Lupin said. "Have you learned anything worthwhile?"

"Well... Bill... let's just say that he knows how to hook up with women in Chile," Harry offered.

Lupin had tipped up the glass and was in mid-swallow at that; Harry barely avoided the spray. "I don't imagine you'll find that useful," he coughed.

“Mr. Weasley, he made me think,” Harry went on. “He talked about family and friends, and about lust for power. That hadn’t occurred to me.”

Lupin nodded. “He’s a good man, Arthur is. I’d have expected him to mention family. Lust for power... he’s certainly correct on that point but I wouldn’t have thought of it either, at least not on the first pass.” He added with a wince, “Do I want to know what Luna had to say?”

“It was the only thing she said that I could make sense of,” Harry said, “but I still don’t know what I think of her answer. She said that lust dies, but love doesn’t die. I can’t believe she found out about it – Covelli must have told her!”

“Perhaps Albus is giving a dressing-down for that, as we speak?” Lupin offered. He finished the remaining water, vanished the glass, and then settled in his chair slowly, almost painfully – the movement made him seem very old to Harry. “Luna certainly went straight to the heart of the matter,” he said. “I think that your mother and father would have agreed with her.”

“Were they in love, my mum and dad?” Harry blurted out.

Lupin smiled a smile that was sad and warm all at once. “Never doubt that, Harry,” he said. “It took them long enough to arrive at it, but by the outset of our seventh year there was no question.”

“I have my mum’s journals – not sure I told you that,” Harry said.

Lupin’s eyes lit. “That extra trunk from the Dursley’s – of course, it belonged to Lily! I imagine there was more inside than simply the journals?”

“She had all of her school things packed away,” said Harry.

“If you want an idea of what happened between the two of them, then give Lily’s journals from sixth and seventh year a go,” Lupin suggested. “I don’t know what she wrote, of course, but I know what I saw and I know what she said to me. She loved James, and I know that James loved her.”

They sat silent for a time while Harry thought about tackling the journals again, and while Lupin appeared to reminisce. Harry cleared his throat. "I've read most of Sirius's journal, but... er..."

"I doubt his observations on the matter were printable," Lupin snorted.

Harry nodded. "Erm, he had a lot to say about lust... I suppose that's why I mentioned it..." Lupin said; his lips twitched for a moment before he burst into laughter. Harry quickly joined him but it didn't last.

An awkward silence followed until Lupin broke it. "Do you think we'll be able to move beyond all of this? I want that very much."

For an instant Harry wanted to lash out but the feeling passed. He had to talk his way through an answer. "Last time you were here, it was just words," he said. "This time, it's not. I didn't understand how it is for you, not until just now."

Lupin fidgeted and wrung his hands. "It's not an excuse – I have no excuses to offer - but I found myself confronted by something I'd never felt," he sighed. "The focus of my life has been control, as it must be. Shona was the only person for whom I'd ever... in any case; I thought she was gone forever. When I saw her standing there in front of me – and when I knew for certain that Heather was... well, it was too much to hold inside. I looked at you, and all I saw was danger." He met Harry's eyes and added, "The worst part is that I was correct. Something's been opened up inside of her and no one knows how to put it back. If the Death Eaters were to find out that you fancied Heather, it wouldn't be a day before they had her. If they were to find out what she can do, then Merlin only knows what would happen. In either case, Harry, she wouldn't survive it. You don't understand how difficult this is... I can't let that happen, Harry – I can't."

Harry couldn't look at him anymore. "I know that," he said. "I know it, and I know I've been selfish, but... how do you know if feelings are real? Maybe it's just something my mind conjured up? Maybe I've just picked up on something inside of her? Maybe... maybe getting inside

her mind burned out something in mine? Look... I know I haven't shown any good sense, right?"

"I wouldn't put it quite so sharply," said Lupin. "You could have been more open that you've been in contact with Heather, but you also could have done something as foolish as taking her to Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley. In point of fact, I have it on good authority that you took Hermione to Hogsmeade recently, even so far as visiting your rooms. As much as I don't want to see Hermione injured again... at least she has the capacity to defend herself or escape. What I truly don't understand is where she fits into this puzzle. I was fairly certain that there was something blossoming between you and she, and apparently you're not at odds... was it the attack that changed everything?"

"Have you seen Hermione since then?" Harry asked.

"No, I've not, but I've been given a rough sense of what happened," Lupin said. "Has she improved?"

Harry frowned. "Sometimes it seems that way, but since the goblin hunt..."

Lupin's brows beetled. "Pardon? Did you say 'goblin hunt'?"

"Oh, right – Hermione, Ron and I went to the goblin hunt over the weekend," Harry said as if it were nothing of importance.

Lupin shook his head. "It's never simple with you, is it? Explanations are in order, I believe."

Harry detailed the hunt and its aftermath. He wavered over telling Lupin the whole truth even as he told the story, but decided that Lupin could be trusted despite everything. Lupin's the one my mum and dad should have trusted, after all – not sodding Wormtail, he thought.

"I'm pleased that you've stuck by her. She's earned that," Lupin said.

"She didn't have to earn anything. Hermione's my best friend," Harry returned.

“And that’s where it ends?” Lupin asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “Kissing her certainly didn’t clear matters.”

“You... seem to be working toward a mastery in that subject...” The werewolf’s jaw twitched, and for a moment Harry thought of readying his wand.

Lupin seemed to settle after a while, and at last he said, “I understand now why your professor set this assignment. You’ve been kissing your best friend while you’re still somehow involved with my daughter – please don’t explain the details, as I don’t want to know. There’s no kind way to say this, Harry: you’re being a bit of a wanker where all of this is concerned.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You... you just called me a wanker!”

“Yes, I did - it seems descriptive of your choices,” Lupin agreed. “You didn’t inherit this sort of behaviour from James. Sirius, on the other hand, was quite comfortable with stringing along two girls at once. I am being as... restrained as I can muster, given the parties involved...”

“I’m not trying to string anyone along,” Harry insisted. “I told Hermione what I wanted but she was the one to back away, and Heather’s the one who started snogging –”

“Please don’t explain yourself!” Lupin insisted. “All you’ve managed is to reinforce my point. You, sir, are a wanker. My question is this: what do you intend to do about it? Well? What of it?”

“You called me a wanker again! I can’t believe you said that!” Harry gasped.

“Why ever not – because I was considered the reasonable one amongst my friends? Sirius and your father were the standards of comparison; I assure you that my reputation was very easily earned,” Lupin said.

“But... but... you called me a wanker...” Harry mumbled.

“We’ve established that, yes, and you’ve earned it! I shall continue to say it until you’ve sorted yourself! There should be one and only one object at a time for your affections – is that understood?” Lupin snapped. “I loved Sirius like a brother, but you don’t need to honour him by being as he was. He wouldn’t want that, and you damn well know it. You’re Harry, not Sirius and not even James, and you don’t need to be anyone other than yourself. Remember that!”

Harry bristled but he couldn’t completely set aside the concern and the fear and the love and the fierceness in the room. He couldn’t keep himself from understanding. “I’m not trying to be Sirius,” he fumed.

Lupin’s expression lightened. “At heart, you’re the same person who I had the pleasure of meeting three years ago – decent, loyal, self-effacing,” he said. “I do understand that you’re confused about these things. Every teenaged wizard is something of a wanker, you see – it’s all a matter of degree.”

“Would you please stop saying that?” Harry huffed.

Lupin held up his hands in defence. “All right, all right! Just... will you please promise me one thing, Harry?”

“That depends on what it is,” Harry said warily.

“I think you earned this assignment honestly, and I want you to promise me that you’ll take it seriously,” Lupin said. “You don’t have the luxury of making choices based on lust, and yes, I know that life is unfair. It’s not as simple a matter as hurt feelings - there are very real risks surrounding you; we’ve gone over this before. I can accept those risks for myself but I still haven’t the faintest idea how to protect Shona, let alone someone who leads as public a life as Heather. We’ve both had our summer, you and me, but now it’s a different season. You admit you’ve been selfish, and so have I... Merlin knows I’ve been terribly selfish. There are so many difficult choices to be made...”



Dumbledore and Covelli were having a quiet but clearly fierce exchange when Lupin opened the door. He gave Covelli a stare hard enough to cut glass and snapped, "Did you share Harry's assignment with Luna Lovegood? If you did, then I will prevent you from seeing Heather with everything available to me."

Covelli was clearly taken aback. "Are you suggesting...? I would never... the very suggestion... it is true that I took some small pleasure in setting this assignment but... to divulge this..."

"You shouldn't take pleasure in making a sixteen-year-old with the weight of the world on his shoulders feel just that much more miserable," Lupin growled. "Merlin knows I've managed that these past weeks, and I've felt guilty about it almost from the start. Having come to my senses, I'm not keen on having someone else do the same!"

Before Dumbledore could intercede, Covelli raised a hand. "I swear upon my magic that I disclosed the existence or nature of Mr. Potter's assignment to no one save Albus Dumbledore." A flash of white light leapt from her fingertips.

Harry quickly deflated. "Then how...?"

Covelli began to pace. "Miss Lovegood is an interesting person to me. This is not the first time that she has been a part of something curious, you see? Did she explain how she came to know of the assignment?" she asked.

Harry closed his eyes and recalled, "She... she said the centaurs told her; she said they were having a laugh over it."

Covelli raised an eyebrow. "The centaurs, she says?"

The corner of Dumbledore's mouth twitched. "When Miss Lovegood was having her chat in the Forest, might she have related her recent theories regarding a certain impending goblin insurrection?" he asked, the twinkle in his eyes fully stoked.

"You have no right to find humour in any of this, Albus," Covelli hissed.

Harry ploughed on. "I admit Luna's a bit dotty, and even more so since the start of term... she said something strange about dreams..."

Covelli's attention immediately returned to Harry. "She mentioned dreams in a specific way?"

Harry nodded. "She seemed awfully confused," he admitted; "I think she was trying to tell me that Hogwarts makes it worse for her somehow. She said that even the castle dreams; I can't imagine what she meant by it."

Covelli's eyes lit. "Albus, I will seek out the girl unless you have objection to it," she said.

Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. "I would appreciate a report of your meeting with her, to the extent that you can reasonably disclose its contents. Well, then... despite everything, it seems that this evening has had one unabashedly good outcome."

Covelli said tiredly, "I'm hard pressed to name one; what would it be?"

"Harry and Remus have put aside their differences – a splendid thing, indeed!" Dumbledore turned to Covelli and added with a twinkle, "Reconciliation is good for the soul, it seems."

"Reconciliation? How dare you even speak the word! I shall speak of reconciliation, you... you old fraud!" Covelli spat. She launched into a bewildering rapid-fire string of what Harry assumed to be Italian. Remus took an unconscious step backward.

Dumbledore was reduced to staccato interruptions. "Oh, my... I have never before been referred to as... that could not be done without a de-boning hex, my dear... I have no earthly idea what that means, but it sounds... now, that is simply gratuitous... good heavens, woman!" He groaned and waved his hand. Covelli continued railing at him for several seconds before she realised that she could no longer be heard; her face exploded in deep crimson.

"This seems like a perfect opportunity to borrow Fawkes, wouldn't you agree?" Remus said; he was clearly straining to hold back laughter. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Doctor; I do hope that we meet again under better circumstances. That was a smashing assignment, by the way." Harry groaned at that.

Lupin put a hand on his shoulder, and said more seriously, "Harry, my door is open to you... excepting tomorrow night, of course. I hope you feel the same."

Harry shook his other hand and said, "Give my regards to Shona, eh?"

"Fawkes, if you would be so kind?" Dumbledore asked wearily. The phoenix crooned softly and offered his tail to Remus. They disappeared in a flash.

Covelli remained in a shuddering rage, and it wasn't lost on Harry that Dumbledore had moved to the opposite side of his desk. Still, he wasn't about to miss a golden opportunity. "So, I understand that we're both apprentices," he smirked. "I suppose there was enough to think about – that must be why you didn't tell me, right? Well, I'm Mr. Potter, but my peers call me Harry. I think your assignment's finished now, and you won't be setting me another." He turned to the Headmaster. "It's Hermione's birthday today and I have a gift to leave with her. If it's all right...?"

Dumbledore gave his beard a stroke. "It is Miss Granger's birthday? This would be her seventeenth, no less. A token of some sort is in order... would you wait for a moment, please?" He disappeared into his library and came out with a book that appeared to be very old. Covelli tried to see the book's spine but Dumbledore moved in a way that blocked her view. Gold wrapping appeared around it, finished with an elaborate red ribbon and bow. He put the package into Harry's hands, and then waved absently toward the stairs.

"Good evening, Headmaster," Harry said. "Good evening... Lucia." Covelli's eyes narrowed into slits, and Harry returned a fatuous grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry could hear the Fat Lady speaking to a student as he approached the entrance to Gryffindor House. "I see your dilemma, Miss, but the common room is set aside for studying – certainly not the corridor. Kindly return inside," the portrait said sternly. He stopped short to observe.

"I have a scroll to finish for Potions," the girl returned, "and this is the quietest place for it."

"It is fifteen minutes past curfew," said the Fat Lady, "and I do not want to see points taken from this House –"

"Then perhaps you can tell the stupid, stupid girls in the dormitory to stop nattering about boys and open a book now and again, or perhaps you might ask the upper years to stop carrying on in the common room as if there was a party every evening, or perhaps you could tell the whole of Gryffindor that this is a school and that some people are here to learn?" she said angrily.

"That is quite enough, young lady!" the Fat Lady scolded. "You must learn the virtues of your House like any Hogwarts student worth her salt –"

"Virtues? Do you mean boasting and eating? I... I wish I could be Sorted again! I'd beg with that stupid Hat! I'd... I'd rather be... I think I'd rather be in Slytherin than here!" wailed the girl.

"This is an outrage!" railed the Fat Lady. "I'm calling for a prefect this instant! Oh, Violet...?" She leaned to one side and her head disappeared from the frame.

Harry took the opportunity to emerge from the shadows. "I remember you – you're Laura Davies," he said.

"M-Mr. P-Potter... I didn't... you... you're so quiet..." she stammered.

He fought the impulse to grin when she unconsciously gave him a half-curtsey, and said, "It's best to keep the Fat Lady on your good side, you know?"

Just then the portrait hole opened and a frowning Parvati Patil came through. Her eyes narrowed and she advanced on Laura. "Not you again," she sighed. "Do you seek out new ways to cost us points? It's occurred to Ron and me that we might be better off asking McGonagall to deduct ten points a day and be done with it! Collect your books and come inside – now, please."

"We were just having a chat, Parvati; there's no need for a snit," said Harry.

Parvati raised a hand to her chest. "OH! I didn't see you there!"

Harry assumed a professor's posture as best he could. "Since I'm on staff, Miss Davies can't be out of bounds – wouldn't you agree? I'll take matters from here," he announced.

"Of course," Parvati said quickly. "When she returns, would you please be sure that she actually comes inside?"

"We'll be in shortly," Harry said. "Is Hermione about?"

Parvati's face fell just a little. "We've managed to get her to stay with us in the common room for once. It's her birthday, you know?" she said.

Harry nodded. "I have some things for her. If you could keep her from slipping upstairs...?"

"If Seamus would stop teasing Neville, it would be a little easier," Parvati sighed.

"Are they still on about that redheaded boy's wand?" Laura grumbled.

Parvati stood straighter. "That's none of your concern, Davies," she said.

"It's my concern if other students can't use the common room, and it should be yours as well," said Harry. "Where else should a student study after curfew?"

“Why would anyone study after curfew... well, other than Hermione?” Parvati asked. “This isn’t Ravenclaw...”

“Only Ravenclaws are supposed to study, is that it?” Harry returned.

Parvati crossed her arms. “You aren’t the most studious person in the castle yourself, Harry.”

“Things change when you’re the Headmaster’s apprentice,” Harry said flatly.

Something shifted in Parvati’s eyes. Harry had seen the same shift a number of times since returning to Hogwarts: it marked the moment when Harry changed from fellow student to something more in a person’s mind. Sometimes he found it painful to watch; with Parvati, he didn’t feel that. “I... I suppose they do,” Parvati said. “Still... first years should keep a stricter curfew, you know?”

“If you can’t find a place for Laura to study, then talk to the other First Year girls, or cast an Imperturbable Charm on her bed curtains, or something. If you’re going to serve as prefect, then act like a prefect,” Harry snapped.

“I’ll...er... just be going inside, then... no need to get shirty with me...” Parvati said nervously as she edged back through the portrait hole.

The fidgeting first-year tried to scoot past Harry and into the common room but he blocked her path. “The first weeks here can be difficult,” he said to her; “My best friend was miserable until Halloween.”

“I’m going to hate the next seven years, I just know it,” Laura said. A tear rolled down her cheek, and Harry hoped he wouldn’t have to console a crying girl – he knew he wasn’t especially good at it.

“It can’t be all that bad,” he assured her. “This was my house, you know? I promise you it isn’t terrible.”

“The girls are all giggly, and the boys are more interested in how loudly they can belch than anything of importance,” she huffed. “I haven’t seen anyone study except the fifth and seventh years... and Hermione Granger.”

“You know her name, do you?” said Harry.

Laura rolled her eyes. “Anyone who follows the papers knows her name and she’s very bright – that wouldn’t be hard to tell even if everyone didn’t say so – but it’s not as if she could help me because I’m just a first-year who no one likes and she’s... well, she’s Hermione Granger, for goodness’ sake!” Her cheeks abruptly burned red. “Oh! I can’t believe I’m telling you about her – what was I thinking?”

“I don’t mind it,” Harry said. “First off, you might have more in common with her than you know. Still, I’ll bet you think she’s a bit... erm... scary?”

The girl squeaked, “I wouldn’t have said ‘scary’, not exactly...”

Harry shrugged. “It’s all right. Hermione’s had a rough go of it – that’s been in the papers as well. If enough people think you’re scary, then it’s not hard to actually become scary, you know?”

“What a horrible thought!” Laura gasped. “Do you... do you think she feels like she’s all alone?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted, and he hoped that Hermione didn’t feel that way – he knew the feeling too well.

“I don’t think she’s scary,” Laura insisted, “but even if she wasn’t... intimidating... I don’t know what I could do. She’d never study with someone like me.”

Harry pursed his lips in thought, and then nodded. “I don’t suppose she would study with a first year, no. She might tutor a first year, though.” He hesitated a moment, and then decided, “I think I might consider that as well.”

Laura's eyes widened. "What...? You actually mean that she might...? And you might...?"

"I'll make you a proposition. If you can convince a dozen first years to form a study group –" Harry began.

"A dozen? But... but there are only nine in all of Gryffindor House!" Laura protested.

"I know that," Harry started again. "If you can convince a dozen to form a study group – and at least one from each house –"

"From each house? How can I do that? No Slytherin's ever going to speak to me!" she pleaded.

Harry didn't acknowledge her objection. "If you can manage that," he promised, "then I'll personally tutor your group in Defence."

The first-year let out a tiny gasp. "You're not joking, are you? Please tell me you're not having me on!"

"I wouldn't do that," Harry assured her. "In fact, I'll make it one better. I'll try to convince Hermione to pitch in – she might cover Transfiguration or Charms, maybe even Potions. If she won't do it, I'll find others. If you put the work into bringing together a group, then we'll come through." He stuck out his hand. "Are we agreed?"

"Y-yes! Of course!" she said instantly. "I... I don't know what to say... I..."

"You could say that you'll stay inside the tower after curfew, for a start," Harry said with a smirk.

"I promise!" Laura said earnestly. "I won't cost Gryffindor any more points!"

Harry laughed, "Don't promise that! I'd rather you think about how you can earn points."

"I know! I could answer more questions in class!" she beamed.



“That sounds like a good starting place,” Harry said. He nodded to the Fat Lady, who waggled her eyebrows at him and then moved aside. “Shall we?” he asked, with a wave toward the opening. The girl nodded enthusiastically and burst into the common room ahead of him.

Parvati had been perched near the opening and nearly had to jump aside. She crooked an eyebrow at Harry and asked, “What did you say to her? She looks like it’s Christmas come early!”

“I just set her a task, that’s all —” Harry stopped as soon as he realised where Laura had gone. “What on Earth is she doing?” The first-year stopped by the fireplace, right in front of where Hermione was seated. Neville stopped telling off Seamus and turned to watch quietly along with most of the students in the room.

Laura quailed, but cleared her throat and said, “Excuse me... Miss Granger...?”

Hermione looked up from a book in her lap. She appeared far more composed than earlier in the day. Her hair was neatly brushed, and if there were still circles under her eyes then she’d made an effort to cover them. She gave a faint smile. “My name is Hermione. May I help you with something?”

“Um... you see...” Laura clasped her hands behind her back and fidgeted as she blurted out in one breath, “Mr. Potter said that if I managed to organise a study group with eleven other first years and at least one from each house he would tutor us in Defence Against the Dark Arts and he said he would ask you to tutor in some of the other subjects but I wanted to ask you myself because I think you’re brilliant and I want to score Outstanding on all of my OWLs like you did so I figured that if I can learn how you do your revisions I might have a better chance of it and I’m not asking because I think you’re feeling all alone now even though I kind of think you are and I don’t think you’re scary – not at all – even though you’re sort of intimidating but I really do want you as a tutor assuming I can actually manage to put together a group and... and...” Seamus burst into loud guffaws

and the first-year turned crimson. Hermione looked out-of-sorts. Harry began to edge across the room.

"I don't know... er... wow... just wow," Neville managed.

Parvati called out, "I think you've said more than enough, Davies – off to bed with you."

"Davies? Are you Roger's sister?" Hermione asked quietly.

"You know him, too? Mr. Potter told me he knew him when he took me for a broom ride in Diagon Alley which was really nice of him and..." Laura blushed even brighter. "I'm saying too much again, aren't I?"

"I know your brother. He helped me a good deal with my Arithmancy when I was a third year. You know, I never considered at the time that he was in his OWL year – it was especially generous of him," Hermione said.

"I'm sure he'll love to hear that..." Laura said politely, but her head was tilted down and she seemed very small. Harry wondered if Hermione had looked so tentative at the outset of her own first year; it was hard for him to remember her that way.

"As for the rest," Hermione went on, "I... it was a lot to take in at once. I'll need some time to consider it and to discuss this with Harry... apparently it didn't occur to him to mention this in advance..."

Laura looked up abruptly. "Oh! I didn't really give Mr. Potter a chance – I mean, he just made the offer – but if you want to talk through it with him, he's right behind you." Hermione turned slowly in her chair; as soon as she'd turned far enough to leave Laura's view, she gave Harry a stern glare.

"Och, he's so doomed..." Seamus muttered.

"Come on, Davies, it's well past time for you to go upstairs," Parvati said. She gave Laura's arm a tug until the first-year followed her away.

“Do you think Dean would be up for a game of Exploding Snap?” Neville asked Seamus. “I know we don’t ordinarily play it upstairs for fear of the hangings catching fire, but since he’s already up there and Ron’s still on rounds I figured that we could start a game... you know... upstairs? In our room?”

“Subtle, Neville,” Seamus chuckled. “We’re off, then.” He mouthed ‘doomed’ at Harry on his way past.

Neville stopped at the foot of the stairs and tapped his foot. “Well? Come on, you lot!” he called to the half-dozen other students still milling about. Two fifth-years grumbled a bit, but they all made their way to the stairs before Neville gave Harry a nod and disappeared up the spiral.

Harry forced himself toward the fireplace, one step at a time. “The thing is –” he started.

“I assume you had planned to discuss this with me?” Hermione said frostily.

“Of course I did! I didn’t expect her to just dash in here and spill her guts!” Harry shot back.

Hermione’s glare faded away. “No, I suppose you didn’t...”

Harry took a seat across from her. “You look like you’re feeling better since this morning.”

“I was a mess, wasn’t I?” she sighed. “There’s just so much to consider, so many things happening at once, and none of it is easy... I suppose I’m still a mess, only a freshly washed one.”

“I’m sorry she was all over you like that,” Harry said. “The girl certainly says what’s on her mind.”

“She meant to be nice, I’m sure. Was... was I like that during first-year?” Hermione asked.

“Sometimes, yeah,” Harry admitted. “You like to say what’s on your mind – or at least you used to like that.”

“I don’t do that so often anymore, do I? There are so many things that can’t be said, too many things,” said Hermione. “Some things can’t be said in front of others, some things are supposed to be said in front of others... how does a person keep it all straight?”

“Keep what straight, exactly?” Harry asked.

“Never mind, it’s not important,” Hermione said quietly.

“So... was she right? Do you feel all alone?” Harry asked.

“Not just now,” Hermione said. “What about you? You’re living alone, studying alone... how do you feel?”

Harry thought about it for a moment before he said, “Busy, for the most part.”

“Do you miss living here?” she asked.

“I miss being part of the House sometimes,” he said. “I miss Quidditch, but I wouldn’t have had time for it this year, and I admit it’s a lot easier to quit because you’re Dumbledore’s apprentice than because you’re too busy for it. I’d have never heard the end of it.”

“That’s true,” she said, “and I think it’s good that Ron’s the Captain now. He’s really coming into his own, you know? It looks good on him.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Oh? Oh... I see...”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I didn’t mean it like that, for goodness’ sake! Besides, he’s had Lavender on his arm again for the last several days.”

“You said her name without shouting!” Harry teased.

“I think she might be good for him, in a way,” Hermione said slowly.

"But you still think there's something better for him?" asked Harry.

Hermione nodded. "I do, but I doubt he'd agree with me. I won't bully him into something, that's for certain."

Harry felt a catch in his chest. "I can't imagine he'd say 'no' if you asked. You know he still fancies you, even if he won't say so."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Wha... you thought I was talking about myself? Harry... I can't believe you would think that! If I fancied Ron, why on Earth would I have let you kiss me?"

"All right, you wouldn't have... but do you...?" Harry stopped himself before he could ask her a question that he wasn't sure he wanted her to answer.

She sat forward on her chair. "Do I what?"

Harry scrambled for an answer. "Erm... do you think there's someone else for Ron, then?"

Hermione looked at him as if he had lost his senses. "You need to pay better attention. Luna, of course!" she said.

"Luna? Um... have you spoken with her recently?" Harry asked.

"Not for a few days, no," said Hermione. "Why do you ask?"

"Something's very wrong. She was raving at me earlier today about dreams. I think that there might be something about Hogwarts that affects her," Harry said.

"Why would you think that? It would have to be something that only affects her, and that's rather unlikely... wait, did you say that she mentioned dreams?" Hermione asked.

"The castle dreams, she said. I actually thought about trying to lure her to the Hospital Wing," Harry admitted.

Hermione's eyes lit. "Do you suppose...? Thank you for telling me, Harry. I'll be sure to seek her out."

The portrait hole slid open and Ron bounded into the common room. "Harry! I didn't expect... Hermione! You're not upstairs!"

"That's a brilliant observation, Ron," she said.

"I'll be back in a snap – don't go anywhere!" Ron shouted as he raced up the stairs.

"What was that all about?" Hermione wondered aloud.

"Has he given you a birthday present yet?" Harry asked.

"Birthday... oh, that. No, he –" she began.

"Here I am!" Ron said. He hopped over the back of the sofa that separated Harry and Hermione. "Just the three of us, eh? No matter... I'll start!"

Hermione squinted at him. "Start...?"

Ron shook his head. "Your birthday party, of course. I'd sing but then you'd have to pay Madam Pomfrey a visit for your ears, so we can skip that bit –"

Harry held out a hand. "Ron... mate! Slow down, would you? Were you hexed on rounds or something?"

"It's nothing like that," Ron assured him. He produced a rectangular package. "I'm just excited because I have at last managed a good gift! It's thoughtful, even!" Harry nearly fell out of his chair with laughter. Hermione politely covered her mouth with one hand.

Ron roughly handed Hermione the package and grumbled, "What? I'm not allowed to be impressed with myself?"

"I'll open it straight away, then; I could use a good impressing," Hermione chuckled. She opened her eyes unnaturally wide. "See? I've just the expression for it."

"Ha, ha." Ron pouted; "See if I go all out for you next year, then."

"Ron, I hope you didn't spend a lot of money on this," Hermione said seriously.

"I wouldn't tell you if I had," Ron said.

"All right, now I'm curious," said Harry. He picked up his chair and set it down beside Hermione.

Hermione slipped open the wrapping. Inside was a white leather-bound book with elaborate inlays in various shades of crimson and gold. A title was illuminated on the front cover and the spine: "The Granger Grimoire". She opened the cover with shaking hands. The book was filled with blank sheets of parchment that looked very soft and very expensive.

"I don't... I don't know what to say... I..." Hermione stammered.

"Dad told my brothers and me that we could start adding to the Weasley grimoire when we come of age... 'course none of the books fared well..." Ron's throat seemed to tighten before he went on, "Anyway, I figured that you should start your own, now that you're seventeen and all."

Hermione set the book down and enveloped Ron in a fierce hug. "It's brilliant, absolutely brilliant," she said before she let him go.

"Good on you, mate," Harry said. Ron hadn't exaggerated – it was a smashing gift, a thoughtful gift. Hermione slowly released Ron and took up the book again.

"You have one of these somewhere, Harry," Ron said. "The Blacks must have had one as well."

"It's probably in the family vault," Harry figured.

Hermione traced the inlays with her fingertips. "This must have cost a fortune, Ron... I love it, but I don't know if I can accept this."

"It's not the sort of thing you can return," Ron said. "You didn't open the other one."

There was another rectangular package inside the wrappings. This one was smaller. As Hermione began to open the second package, Harry noticed an acrid smell. "Take extra care with this one," Ron said; "It's practically falling apart."

The book inside looked as if it had been through a fire, but it gave off a subtle sense that something far worse had happened to it. Hermione shivered as she touched it. "What happened to this book?" she whispered.

Darkened flakes fell away as she slowly brushed her hand across the cover. Harry squinted at it, and with a little imagination he could make out the tattered gold lettering: "The Grimoire of the Honourable House of Prewett".

"I couldn't possibly...!" Hermione gasped. "I care for you very much; truly I do, but..." Her brow furrowed. "You can't give this to me, Ron – you're not allowed. Isn't it expected that this would go to Bill, if he should marry and have children?"

Ron shook his head. "Bill gets the Weasley Grimoire; this one goes to Ginny someday, actually. Problem is, the magic's bleeding out of it – look at it crumble! No one's even opened it since... well, since we picked it out of the rubble. Mum doesn't know I brought it here, but Dad does, and... look, this isn't exactly a normal gift ..." He fidgeted as he went on, "I was hoping that you could copy whatever spells are still in there before they're gone altogether, see? I figured they could be the first to go into your grimoire –"

"And you'd like me to make a second copy for your Mum?" Hermione finished for him.



Ron's voice diminished to a mumble as he stammered, "Er... I did get a second book made, but I could ask Professor Flitwick... there must be some Ravenclaws who would jump at something like this... suppose it's not right for me to make you work for a birthday gift, anyway..."

"This isn't something trivial like asking to copy class notes; it's important to your family, and it's obviously important to you," Hermione said. "It would be a privilege – of course I'll do it, Ron."

Ron brightened up considerably. "There were some dead useful charms in there, at least that's what I remember. I think you'll be impressed," he said with not a little pride.

Hermione very carefully set the charred book aside and pulled Ron into a second hug. "Anything I ever said about your lack of sensitivity, Ron... I take all of it back, every last thing," she sniffed.

Harry reached out and gave Ron's shoulder a brotherly squeeze. "How am I to follow that?" he said. Ron simply smiled at him, and then slowly eased Hermione an arm's length away.

"Honestly, Harry – this isn't a competition," she tut-tutted.

"Why, thank you for reminding me," Harry said casually. "I'll just hold these until Christmas –"

"Not hardly! Give them over!" Hermione laughed. She grabbed at the first of three packages that Harry had stacked atop the low table.

"That one's from Dumbledore," said Harry.

Hermione's eyes went wide. "The Headmaster sent me a birthday gift?" She quickly dispatched the crimson ribbon and tossed aside the gold paper. Ron and Harry leant in for a closer look.

"A book – figures, I suppose, but what is it?" Ron asked.

"Give me a moment to read the runes..." Hermione said.

“He took it from his library,” Harry said.

Hermione set the book down and frowned. “I can’t believe he referred to this as a gift,” she said.

“It’s not from the Hogwarts Library – it’s from his own library,” Harry repeated. “I don’t think you’re meant to return it, if that’s the issue.”

“This relates to the research I’ve been set, and I don’t believe I’d care to keep it,” Hermione said flatly; “Honestly, I’d rather not read it at all.”

Ron put on a smile. “A book you don’t want to read? That’s not possible –”

“There are things I know now that I wish I didn’t,” Hermione said harshly.

Ron shifted uneasily in his seat. “Er... how about that next package, eh? It looks too small to be a book. That’s a good thing, right?”

“This one’s from a friend,” Harry said. “I told him I’d pass it along. I can’t say who he is – it’s a secret.”

Hermione stared at the red-wrapped package for a long time. “Tell your friend that I don’t want to know where they are. It isn’t safe for me to know,” she said at last.

Harry thought on that and decided to answer, “I’m fairly sure there isn’t parchment inside.”

“So it’s a gift...?” She reached for it quickly and tore at the paper. A small square mirror tumbled out. There were a few faint spidery lines etched in the surface.

Ron raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that...? Didn’t that belong to, um, you know...?”

Hermione started to breathe rapidly. “I never actually saw you use this,” she said. “I’m guessing that it doesn’t require a wand?”

Harry cleared his throat. "Um... if you want to talk to her, you just say her first name. There was a note with the other one, so I figure she knows what to do."

She looked at Harry wild-eyed. "I don't need this, you know – I don't need it. I can do this myself. I can do what has to be done."

Ron reached out to put a hand on her shoulder. "I don't know what this is all about –?"

She swatted his hand away and snapped, "No, you don't."

"I don't know what this is about," Ron said again, "but you're not doing anything on your own. You sound like Harry did last year."

"This isn't about what you want," Hermione said angrily. "There are things I have to do – there are things I know – and you can't help me, not you and certainly not Harry."

"And now you really sound like Harry did," Ron fired back. "So much for being the brightest witch in our year, eh?"

"Stop it!" Harry growled. "Hermione's nothing like I was last year, and it's her birthday – I won't have us at each other's throats!" Ron sullenly crossed his arms and Hermione shrunk in her chair. He reached out and took Hermione's hand. "I didn't think this was something you needed. I figured it was something you might want. Keep it, in case you change your mind." Hermione brought her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Is the last one from you, Harry, or is it from your friend?" Ron asked. Harry glared at him.

"I'm sorry I was cross with you both," Hermione said quietly.

Harry hefted the last package. "This can wait until tomorrow if you like," he said.

She let her legs loose and shook her head. "Best that I open it now," she said.

He handed her the package slowly, and hoped she would like the gift inside. The bookseller in Edinburgh had taken a full week and a good deal of money to secure it. After her response to the mirror, he was more than a little worried about the response that the book might provoke.

She stopped when the publisher's box was half-revealed. "What on Earth...?"

Harry started, "It's..."

"I know what it is," Hermione whispered. She removed the rest of the wrapping and stared silently at the box for a long time before she took out the book inside.

"Erm... it came from a limited edition – the bookseller told me there were only two hundred made – and, um, you might want to open the cover," Harry said nervously.

Ron leant in, perplexed. "Where's Pooh Corner, and who has a house there?"

She turned open the cover. "It's signed... good heavens, it's signed by both A.A. Milne and the illustrator..." Her eyes were misty when she looked up at last. "How could you possibly...?"

"I saw the photo in your Dad's study," Harry said. "He told me it was the first book you ever read, so I thought you should have it."

"You could have gone to WH Smith and picked up a new edition for ten pounds," she sniffed.

Harry felt his cheeks warm and he looked down at his feet. "I figured you'd like this better," he said softly.

"And Harry catches the Snitch again," Ron said with a disbelieving shake of the head. "Oh, well – I gave it my best effort."

Hermione sprang to her feet and dragged Ron to his. "Remember, it isn't a competition," she said and pulled him into a third hug. Harry hummed the first bars of "Weasley Is Our King" and Ron stuck out his tongue.

She released him and slowly advanced toward Harry. "And as for you..."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of the look in her eyes. "You... you did like it... right?" She answered with a breath-taking embrace. When she loosened her hold, she didn't pull away; instead she brought one hand up to his cheek. The combination of the look in her eyes and the emotions flowing from her nearly made his knees buckle.

"If you're going to kiss him, would you get on with it?" Ron said. "I'll turn away and count to ten... don't think I could stand watching you snog his face off."

Hermione's lip quirked and she started to chuckle. Her arms fell to her sides and she lowered her head against Harry's chin and nose and lips. He instinctively kissed her forehead, and she raised her head as if stung. The same look was still in her eyes when she put one hand around the back of his head and brought him to her. It wasn't as clumsy as the first time they'd kissed – they only bumped noses once. It wasn't at all lost on Harry that this time she was the one who started the kiss.

"TEN," Ron called out. Hermione buried her head against Harry's shoulder and laughed so hard that she shook in his embrace.

Harry pulled a face at Ron. "If you weren't such a good friend..."

"That's right, and best you don't forget it," Ron returned with a smirk.

Hermione turned to face Ron, but her left arm stayed firmly against Harry. She was still flushed from laughing. "Will you be all right with this, if... you know...?"

Ron pursed his lips, and then said, "I will, actually. I'm a little surprised myself, but I will. So, are you...?"

Harry wouldn't have noticed that Hermione tensed if they hadn't remained so close. Still, she didn't pull free or let her arm fall. "I don't know," he said before she could speak. "It's like this..." He struggled for the right words. "Hermione and me, we just... we just are."

"We are, aren't we?" Hermione agreed.

Ron rolled his eyes and said, "Completely mental, the both of you."

"You should probably head back to Hogsmeade while there's still light," Hermione said, even though she made no move to let him go.

"Oi, I have something to say about that," Ron said; he made an attempt to look stern that Harry thought missed the mark.

"What, about going back to my rooms?" said Harry.

"Look, Hermione won't say it and it doesn't seem like anyone else will, so I suppose it's my place to do it." Ron took an exaggerated breath, and said, "Come back to Hogwarts."

Harry's brow furrowed. "I am back at Hogwarts, in case you hadn't noticed."

"No, you twit!" Ron huffed. "What I mean is that you should let those rooms go and come back to Hogwarts. You should be here, that's what I think."

Harry abruptly pulled free of Hermione. "Why? I'm under Dumbledore's thumb enough as it is. I'm free, living in Hogsmeade –"

"Free to do what?" Ron pressed. "You're working with the teachers most of the time anyway. What, you think Dumbledore would lock the gates as soon as you brought in your trunk?"

"He might!" protested Harry. "Who put you up to this?"

Ron's jaw clenched. "I put myself up to this. We need you here! Dean's painting all the time and Seamus is trying to get in a different girl's knickers every week and Neville... well, he's Neville... and Ginny's driving me mad and there's no one to look over my Quidditch plays or for me to crush in chess now and again. You know that Hermione needs you here, but apparently she's decided on a holiday from bossing the two of us –"

"That's enough," Harry said. "Hermione, do you really...?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes. "It's not important what I think on this. If you like living in Hogsmeade, then you should live there," she said.

Harry said, "Still, I'd like your opinion."

Hermione seemed to fight an internal battle before she said with clear reluctance, "I think you should live wherever is the safest, Harry. You're too important to leave that to chance. Now, I have a bit of revising left this evening. Thank you so much for the gifts." Before Harry could say anything else, she darted forward and kissed him on the cheek. He found that he didn't want to take his eyes off of her, and stood there as she vanished the stray wrapping and settled in with a tattered textbook. He could see that there was writing all through the margins.

"Are you going to stand there all night?" she asked without looking up. He knew that the corner of her mouth was crooked in a smirk even though he couldn't see her face.

"I've never seen you write in your books before," he said, rather than stand there dumbly.

"Flourish and Blotts couldn't obtain enough copies," she said, and held up the book. Harry could barely read the faded title: Advanced Potion Making, by Libatius Borage. "It's been out of print for years, apparently. I was given this one by Professor... er, sorry – by Snape at the end of the first class."

Harry felt a flash of anger at the name. "After he took points and insulted you, I'm sure," he said.

"The side notes have been useful," she said. "It's going to be dark soon; you should go."

"I can take a hint," Harry said. A quick glint of light caught his eye, and Harry noticed that she'd slipped the mirror inside the cover of the book. He hoped she would use it.

"I'll walk out with you," Ron said. As soon as they cleared the portrait hole, he grabbed Harry firmly by the upper arm.

Harry pulled away. "What gives?"

Ron snarled. "You're done with Heather, do you understand me? Finished."

"I know," Harry said.

Ron was red from forehead to chin. "I told you what would happen if you hurt Hermione, and I meant it. You're not invincible, you know, and I'm not the only one who would give you what-for. I'll bet I could get Bill to hex you from here to Egypt! The twins might come back to finish seventh year, just out of spite!" he snapped.

"Ron – I know," Harry repeated. "Someone reminded me today that we're not on holiday anymore. It's over, all right? It couldn't work out even if I wanted that... and I don't want that, not really."

"I don't want to hear 'not really' from you," Ron said. "Do you fancy Heather or not?"

Harry took a moment to compose his answer. "I liked the idea of it," he said at last, "but the thing between us wasn't real. Hermione's real, and she's right here, and she means the world to me."

"And there are more important things to do, aren't there?" Ron added.

Harry nodded. "I know what I have to do. The summer's over now," he said.



Ron crossed his arms. "Well, you still can't hurt Hermione, right? As far as I can see, if the two of you 'are', then you and anyone else 'aren't'."

Harry smiled. "I understand," he said, and he started on his way down the corridor.

"I expect to see that trunk of yours," Ron called after him; "You're moving back in here."

"Good night, Ron," Harry returned.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

### THE TYPHOON TYCOON

September 20, 1996

“Tun-de-ray,” Harry said. The tip of his wand gave a sickly flicker. A small clay figure set atop his small dining table trembled and then went still. He went back to the faded book that Flitwick had loaned him. “No, that's not it,” he murmured.

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Tundere / tutudi

Two companion spells used by apothecaries to separate and reduce various raw ingredients to granules (tundere) or pulp (tutudi). The wand movement for both spells requires a slight variation on the Bachman Waggle, whereby the right rotation is reversed. Neither spell will act upon a living animal or conjured ingredient.

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Harry gave his wand the designated waggle and pronounced, “Too-too-dee.” A sharp yellow beam lanced out and reduced the figure to dust. He scratched his head and wondered aloud, “Wrong rotation?” Sometimes it's all in the pronunciation, he reminded himself as he set a second figure into place. Let's try Tundere again.

“Tun-DAY-ray,” he called out, and the figure fell into a pile of several hundred equally sized pieces. Satisfied with the result, he cast Reparo. The pieces stayed in place without so much as a shudder. He set his wand on the table in disgust and quickly paged through the book.

“Strange... but if that's what it says... Finite incantatum. Reparo,” he said. The second clay figure quickly reformed.

Harry stood before his sofa with some trepidation, and said to himself, "All right, Filius, you thought I might be able to do this, so... Tundere!" The sofa vibrated rapidly and then fell into six good-sized piles of small pieces. He fell to his knees from the effort. His sofa had been neatly sorted into three different fabrics, two sorts of wood and a pile of metal bits.

"Finite incantatum. Reparo," he said, and the pieces whirled about until they took the rough shape of a sofa. Rather than joining together, they simply hung there and wobbled. Harry happened to open his hand. Two loose granules flew free, and his sofa regained its form in an instant. That's a twitchy spell, he thought; you need every single bit in order to reverse it. He supposed that an apothecary didn't have much call to restore an ingredient already reduced to small pieces or pulp.

Flitwick had opened Harry's eyes to the idea of using spells for wholly unintended purposes. Tundere could clear a fallen boulder. Tutudi could turn the ground beneath an opponent's feet into something resembling quicksand – at least when the Charms professor cast it. Remembering one's options in the heat of the moment was another matter entirely. In a dozen practice duels, he had yet to last more than two minutes against Flitwick.

Harry dragged himself off the floor and fell heavily onto the sofa, which promptly fell into a thousand pieces. He landed on one shoulder against the granular remains of the sofa's metal frame and let out a loud "Oof!" His wand buzzed as someone passed through the simple perimeter ward he had cast in the stairwell. With a wince, he pulled himself up from the floor once again. Someone pounded roughly on the door and he made ready.

"You all right in there? I thought the roof was caving in!" Detheridge called out.

"What kind of wand do you have?" Harry returned.

"I'm not the only one who could tell you that, but I'll play along. Six inches, redwood and horned owl feather," Detheridge said, and then added with a grumble, "and you'd better not be setting me up for a

wand joke. I've heard enough about my six-inch horny owl to last a lifetime."

Harry had no doubt it was Detheridge. "I'm all right; no worries," he laughed through the door.

After a few silent moments, Detheridge asked, "So can I come in or are you busy? Just because there's no tie on the door doesn't mean there's no bra on the floor, you know?" Harry spluttered something unintelligible and flung open the door.

The Defence professor loped inside and said with a shake of his head, "You're too easy to wind up. When I was your age -"

"I really don't want to know," Harry cut him off.

Detheridge's eyes widened. "Why did you kill your couch?" he asked.

"Couch? Oh, the sofa! I was practicing spells for Filius," Harry said sheepishly.

Detheridge sifted a handful of granules. "It sure wasn't a Reductor curse – not a mark on them... what on Earth did you cast?"

"Tundere – it's an apothecary spell," explained Harry.

Detheridge let the granules scatter and laughed, "Leave it to Flitwick; I'll bet he'd duel you with a Hedge Trimming charm just to mix things up!" Harry's hand automatically went to his hair and Detheridge laughed even more loudly.

"You don't have to duel him every other day," Harry complained.

"I thought I'd catch a late breakfast downstairs," Detheridge said. "Join me. We need to talk."

Harry checked his watch. "I have Croaker in an hour and he's firm about time."

Detheridge muttered something about a sharp stick that Harry couldn't quite make out, and then said, "I'd say we could go up to the castle for a bite, but Rosie would skin me alive if I didn't stop for at least one meal a day."

"Rosie?" Harry asked.

"Sorry... Madam Rosmerta to you," Detheridge said.

"Er... never knew she was called Rosie..." Harry mumbled.

"Enough of that – there's a lot to cover," said Detheridge. "You're meeting Keith MacLeish tomorrow, is that right?"

"What of it?" Harry asked as he set his wards and descended the stairs. "Do you know him?"

"I've worked for him a time or two... wouldn't say I know him, exactly," Detheridge said.

Harry perked up immediately. "What's he like?" he asked. Detheridge motioned for Harry to hold his question. He gave Madam Rosmerta a roguish smirk; to Harry's shock, her cheeks reddened before she waved them to an open table.

"All right," Detheridge said as they took seats, "you want to know about MacLeish. I'll tell you what I can."

Harry stammered, "Wha... but... you... she...?" and leant his head toward Rosmerta, who was making for them with a large plate and a bowl.

"I thought you didn't want to know," Detheridge said. "Besides, I'm a gentleman -"

"The hell you are," Rosmerta purred as she set the plate before Detheridge. She looked to Harry and asked, "What would you care to eat, dear? Nothing as odd as this one, I'll wager."

"I like my Wheaties, thank you, and I have shown my appreciation for your efforts," Detheridge pouted. Rosmerta gave a very unladylike snort in reply.

"I'll have whatever is easiest for you," Harry said.

"So like your mother, you are," said Rosmerta with a smile. "That would be tea and scones... unless you fancy some of that tree bark Marcus favours?"

Harry peered past Detheridge's eggs and rasher of bacon and into the bowl. "Erm... do I have to?" he asked.

"It's good for you," Detheridge protested. "Fine, but you're drinking orange juice at least. I don't know how you people drink anything that comes from a pumpkin – blech!"

"I figured that pumpkin juice was just a wizarding thing, you know? You don't drink it in America, then?" Harry asked.

"No one with taste buds does!" Detheridge answered immediately. "It's definitely an English thing... like marmite." He shuddered and his mouth wrinkled up.

"I'll grant you that one," admitted Harry.

Rosmerta shuffled off to fetch Harry tea, scones and orange juice, and Detheridge returned to the matter at hand. "So... MacLeish. Let me see... he's about McGonagall's age, but looks a bit younger. He went to Hogwarts, but he's had one foot and half the other in the ordinary world for as long as I've heard tell. His magical family is on his mother's side -"

"So his dad was a Muggle?" Harry cut in.

Detheridge explained, "His father was a newspaperman in Australia, and that's where MacLeish made his money at first. He bought up ordinary newspapers all over the world, and moved into TV after that – you know, the 'telly'?" When Harry nodded, he went on, "MacLeish owns satellites – they're the things up in space that bounce the TV

shows around the world. He does something or another with telephones, too. Anyway, he started buying up the wizarding papers a few years ago, and wizarding radio – wireless, you folks call it.”

“Right, then – so he's rich. Why does everyone hate him so – is it over the money? What's his interest in me, do you think?” asked Harry.

Detheridge rubbed his chin. “I don't rightly understand why he's interested in you... never have... but the rest? It comes down to two things. First and most important, he thinks we should reveal ourselves to the rest of the world.”

“What? That's bloody mad!” Harry squawked.

“A lot of wizards agree with you,” Detheridge said with a shrug. “MacLeish's point is that we won't be able to hide much longer, not without a lot more effort. Wizards in America understand that. The kind of secrecy you'd need would turn everything on its head – we're just too integrated there. The second reason is more of an English thing... a European thing, I guess. We just don't care all that much about bloodlines. See, MacLeish... he goes out of his way to lift up new wizards, poor wizards, creatures, even squibs; he's well known for it. I figure that's why I didn't last. You'd call me a pureblood here – I go back a good ten generations.”

“Well, I can't fathom revealing the wizarding world, but the rest... look, I'd probably do the same in his place,” Harry admitted.

“Then you might want to think about living somewhere else,” Detheridge returned. “Now if you really want the skinny on MacLeish, then you sit yourself down with Lucia.”

Harry's jaw instantly tightened. “I don't want to talk with that woman about anything,” he snapped.

Detheridge snorted and said, “Oh, grow up.”

“Marcus -” Harry started to complain.

Detheridge shook his head. "Don't 'Marcus' me," he said. "Lucia's smart, she's savvy, she's rich, she knows MacLeish inside and out, she knows some awfully sophisticated magic, and your friend Granger leans on her. Now she isn't perfect, and neither are you. Do you want to burn the next year butting heads with her? I figure she can be your ally or your enemy, and there won't be a lot of middle ground. You're a couple of stubborn mules."

"You don't know what she -" Harry started.

Detheridge set his spoon down hard. "No, I don't know – don't need to know," he said. "You don't have to forgive her – you don't even need to like her – but you have to work with her. You need to work with me, with Flitwick, with Shacklebolt, with Albus, with Albus's friends... damn it, Harry, you need to work!"

Harry sat back in his seat. "I... uh..."

Detheridge did the same. "Look, I know you take a lot of grief from people. I don't want to pile on, but right now you don't need sunshine from me – you need the truth. You ready for my take on our first three weeks together?"

Harry swallowed audibly. "Er... am I?"

"Unimpressive, Harry! You can do better," Detheridge snapped. "I know Granger was hurt – hurt badly – but I've had the same talk with her. I'm giving her two weeks to pull it together, and I think she's going to have to stay in private lessons for a while. As for you, you've had a month and a half to jerk around and it stops here. There's a Dueling Club you haven't started yet, lessons to do, spells to master, and a pack of lunatics out there who'd kill you just as soon as look at you. Albus doesn't have the stones to say it, so it falls to me. Snap out of it!" He shoved a spoonful of the awful looking flakes into his mouth, chewed roughly, and went on, "All this running around the country puts you and everyone else on your tail at risk, and you damn well know it. Maybe I don't have all the facts, but if this is just about getting laid -"



“Wha...? That's... that's... you've absolutely no idea about it!” Harry shouted.

Detheridge let out a long sigh. His speech had never been formal and the ebb-and-flow of his cadence was always noticeable, but now it became even stronger. Harry had never heard its like, but there was something inescapably rural about it. “Back in the day, I used to hunt,” Detheridge said. “You ever hunt, Harry? I suppose not. My uncle, he taught me to do it like an ordinary – none of this crappin' around with a wand. There's a sport to it, see... ah, forget it. Point is, I used to have this hound that went by the name of Buck. Now he was supposed to follow the scent trail until we treed whatever we were after, or at least cornered it. Buck, though, he never could get it right. He was always jumpin' from one trail to the next to the next, confused as the devil. He'd find two good trails, and the useless sack o' bones liked one as much as the other. He'd sniff at this one and sniff at that one and go around in circles for a while, and then he'd plop down on the ground, scratch himself and howl away... scared off the quarry, 'course. So we'd head on to the cabin, he'd plant his snout in a bowl of dog food and I'd take whatever was in the cupboard. Buck was a stupid damn dog – worthless for huntin', but he's what I had.”

Harry was utterly lost. “Uh-huh...” he said blankly.

“Missing the point?” Detheridge asked.

“Completely,” Harry said honestly.

Detheridge reached toward him blinding fast and swatted him atop the head. “Stop sniffin' around and pick a trail!” he barked. “Settle up with MacLeish, get back here and get to work! All right... that's all I have.”

Harry sat there, shocked and angry and unmoving, as Detheridge polished off the remainder of his breakfast. The professor at last pushed back from the table and said, “Let's go.”

“I still don't want to talk to Covelli,” Harry said.

"Boo-hoo, m'boy. You can use our time slot for it – I know she's free," Detheridge shot back.

Harry scowled at him. "Fine, then. We'd best pick up the pace. It takes about twenty minutes to walk up -"

"Walk? Who said anything about walking?" Detheridge said. "You've got your bike, don't you?"

Harry felt for the Bonnie in his pocket. "You could ride pillion, I suppose..." he said.

"Pillion... you mean on the back?" Detheridge snorted. "I won't fit on the back of that thing. Now if I still had my Hog..."

Harry gaped at him. "You rode around on a hog? Right... I'd have to see that to believe it."

"No, not on a pig!" Detheridge groaned. "I'll explain it on the way. Now then... you plan to tell me how this thing works without a clutch?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come in," Covelli called out.

Harry didn't want to come in, but neither did he want to be on Detheridge's bad side. The professor had managed to hound Harry for the balance of the day. They had passed in the corridors half a dozen times by the noon hour, though it was rare that they would see one other in the castle at all outside of scheduled tuition. Hastily scrawled platitudes about responsibility, duty, pride in one's work and picking a trail had turned up in the pockets of his robe, in the books packed inside his rucksack, and even inside his trainers. It had been quite enough, and so it was that Harry came to Covelli's study. He pushed open the door with a loud squeak.

"And so Mr. Detheridge's motives become clear," Covelli said.

Harry frowned. "I'll come back another time -"

Covelli quickly rose from behind her desk. "No! No, please – sit."

A long sigh escaped Harry's lips and he sat heavily on the armchair opposite her. "Right, then..." he started, but he really didn't know what else to say or even what needed to be said.

Covelli wouldn't meet his eyes. "It seems that Marcus believes me so weak, prideful or self-absorbed that I would not seek you out of my own accord," she said. "He decided that I would not apologise without first being confronted by you. He should not have made this assumption on my behalf; it was not his place." She returned a sigh of her own and added, "Now we shall never know if he was correct."

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Covelli's tone, her behaviour, even her posture was different than in all their previous encounters. He wasn't merely uncertain; he was bewildered. "Erm..." he began.

Covelli held up a hand. "Please, let me speak my peace," she said. "When I have finished, you may, ehh... 'let me have it', as they say." Harry folded his hands in his lap and waited.

She steepled her fingers, closed her eyes and began, "When August began, I was preparing for classes. I was a professor of psychiatry, you see? I was seeing patients in hospital and my regular clients as time allowed. I was editing manuscripts for colleagues and preparing to begin a paper of my own. Since that time, I have retired from my post, given up my practice, and returned to a world that I chose to leave behind. I have lost my professional identity and for the next several months I have lost my freedom."

"Why are you here, then?" Harry asked.

"I returned to this place because I was needed," she said. "It is the same for you, is it not?"

"But you hate Dumbledore – that much is obvious..." said Harry.

Covelli sagged in her chair. "I do not hate Albus... that is far too strong... but I did not return for his sake," she said. "What is the worst loss you can imagine, Harry?"

"My friends," he said immediately; "I can't imagine losing any of them, and I know I probably will."

"I have lost friends and family, and it is excruciating," she said, "but there is something worse for a person of my profession and inclinations. I have lost my objectivity, my professional distance, you see?"

"Sorry, I don't see," Harry admitted.

"One must sit at arm's length when dealing with matters of the mind. The relationship between a client and myself is meant to be outgrown," Covelli tried to explain. "Personal issues that affect the professional are not supposed to intrude..."

"So you're here for Hermione, then," said Harry.

"I am here because I grew too close to the situation and too close to the client," Covelli corrected him. "That was my folly - one that I did not expect after so many years. I allowed myself to be a witch rather than a physician. From there, it was a short journey to becoming mentor rather than healer, friend rather than advisor."

"When I saw you with her in the Library, that first time we met, you seemed like a second mum," Harry observed.

"The relationship between Miss Granger and myself is complicated and, for the moment, remains privileged," Covelli said in a measured way. "I have treated you poorly as a result of it, however, and for this I do apologise. Now is the time when you let me have it."

Harry told Covelli honestly, "I'm glad you're here for her."

"I hope it will be enough. I hope it will help more than harm," said Covelli. "Do you know I was furious with Albus for allowing her to attend the goblin hunt? He was wrong to allow it. I was wrong to blame you for it, however."

"Is that why you stuck me with that assignment?" Harry asked.

"The purpose of the assignment was to lead you to logical conclusions," Covelli insisted. "I understand that Marcus took a different approach this morning?"

Harry laughed despite himself. "He slapped me on the head and said I was a hound."

"He said you were a dog...? The man is bewildering," Covelli said. She paused, crossed her arms and added, "And so, it comes to this: can we work together, you and I?"

"We have to work together," Harry answered. "It must be strange for you, being a student again. I don't want you to treat me like a little boy, but I honestly don't expect to be treated as an equal."

Covelli sat straight in her chair. "We are peers in academic rank," she said. "As a witch, I have yet to earn a mastery and have not practiced my craft in a good many years. I vastly outrank you in life experience and scholarly training, but there is much in the way of magic that I must re-learn. As an example, you could easily best me in a duel were we to face each other today. Perhaps we shall learn from each other, yes?"

"That's... an interesting idea," Harry decided.

"In that spirit, we should speak of Keith MacLeish," Covelli offered.

Harry nodded. "Marcus said you know him rather well?"

"I know Keith very well indeed," said Covelli. "We were married, he and I."

"Married?" Harry goggled.

"Yes, married – from 1967 until 1977," Covelli confirmed.

Harry was caught completely flat-footed. "I... I had no idea..." he managed.

"It is not something that I publicise," she said.

Harry thought back to the invitation from MacLeish. "He married again, then? I know that he has a daughter and I had the impression that she still lives with him."

Covelli's expression blanked. After a time, she said quietly, "Nicola was born in 1975... I would rather not discuss her just now."

"Sorry, I was curious because his note said she would be there for the weekend," Harry said.

Her eyes widened noticeably before she regained control. "This would not be wise. Nicola is, ehh... fragile," she said. "I must contact Keith and convince him otherwise. If he will not listen to reason, then we will speak of this – I promise you."

"I didn't mean to pry," Harry said.

Covelli took a long deep breath before she said, "That was not your intention, I know this." She folded her hands and asked, "What do you need to know about Keith? What is his interest in you?" Harry did his best to explain the business relationship that Diggle had set up: the sale of the castle, the share in the Daily Prophet and the license for Harry's name and face. He figured that he did a fair job, because she seemed to understand.

When he was finished, she nodded and paused in thought. "That is not enough," she concluded. "His interest is greater than this. Keith would not go to these lengths for this agreement. In his world, this was a very small transaction. Perhaps it would help to read his note?"

"I've read it and re-read it, actually... could practically recite it by now. Nothing stands out for me," Harry said. He fished in his rucksack and found the dog-eared invitation.

Covelli read the invitation and muttered all the while. "Pevensey... I take it this refers to the Black property... but the performance is in Edinburgh... he's putting his wealth on display for the purebloods... oh, dear, Catriona's been charged with the Daily Prophet?"

"The note's on the back side," Harry told her.

"Yes, I see this... 'anxious to met you', he writes... it is true that he has few partners, and interesting that he describes you as such... very interesting... 'my daughter and I'?" Covelli set the invitation down on her desk and wondered aloud, "What game is afoot, Keith?"

"I suppose I'm glad you're confused," said Harry. "I kept wondering if there was something about this that I was supposed to understand, something I was missing?"

"He does not want your money or your lands or the right to place your image on chocolates," Covelli said. "He wants you, Mr. Potter. The important question to answer is why he wants you."

Harry hesitated before he said, "Er... Harry; you can call me Harry, if you like?"

For the first time since he had met her, Covelli gave a genuine smile. "I would like that," she said. "You may call me Lucia if you wish."

"I'll work on that," Harry said.

Covelli picked up the invitation again. "It is written that you may bring a guest of your choosing," she said. "Who will be your guest?"

"I had thought about asking Hermione, but I don't think that's for the best," Harry admitted.

"I should say not," said Covelli. "The other young lady who inhabits your thoughts will be the centre of attention." When Harry's eyes narrowed, she added, "We both know that there are other reasons for Miss Granger to refrain from travelling."

"This is my chance to tell Heather that we're just friends," Harry said.

"You think this will be so simple?" Covelli asked.

Harry nodded and said, "I don't see why not?"

Covelli shook her head and smiled. "I am sorry for this, but... Harry, you are so young," she said.

"I need her to be my friend," Harry insisted. "I think she understands me, you know? Heather could be like... like family."

Covelli pursed her lips, then allowed, "This is a more effective message; I hope that she will hear it. And so, returning to the matter at hand... what guest will you choose? It would be the Weasley boy, perhaps, or Mr. Longbottom? It is without saying that Albus would prefer you select one of his flock – the older Weasley or this Tonks, perhaps?"

Harry thought on it for a while, and then he took on a mischievous smirk. "How would you like to go to a party?" he asked. Covelli's face went bone-white and her mouth opened and closed without a sound.

"I'm serious," Harry said. "It would put him back on his heels, wouldn't it? Besides, you're worried about your daughter, right? If you're there, I'd think that would keep him in line."

"I... I..." was all Covelli managed to say.

"I could ask Filius – he gives good advice," Harry mused. "You can forget Tonks – she has a big mouth. I'd probably ask Mr. Weasley before I'd ask Bill."

"You would not prefer to take a date or a friend?" Covelli asked.

"Everyone seems to think that MacLeish will eat me alive," Harry said. "I figure good advice is more important than a good time."

Covelli looked down for a long moment, and then met Harry's smirk with one of her own. "I would treasure a photograph of the expression on Keith's face when I am introduced," she said. "Understand this, Harry: my presence may create a stir amongst some of the old families, if they choose to attend. I was rather famously cast out of my own family."



Harry shrugged. "So was Sirius Black," he said. "I figure it's a point in your favour."

\* \* \* \* \*

At the conclusion of the day's classes, Harry met Covelli at Dumbledore's office and they Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron. From there, Covelli hailed a taxi. After a stomach-churning run through traffic that rivalled the Knight Bus, they were deposited at a dingy car-park not far from Heathrow.

Harry tried to ask Covelli, "What is this place?" but she merely held up her hand and allowed the driver to deposit their luggage at the kerb.

As soon as the driver was properly tipped and sent on his way, she said, "People in the know call this the Nexus. It is the designated apparation point for Heathrow, the collection point for the Strait Line, a regular stop for the Knight Bus, a wizard-friendly place for cars-for-hire... if you have a mind to travel in and out of England, you will come here at some point."

"Heathrow has an apparation point? Why?" Harry asked.

Covelli gave him an odd look. "Heathrow has an apparation point because it is the largest airport in the country," she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Why wouldn't you just pick up an international portkey?"

"You make that sound as if it were an easy thing," said Covelli.

"They mustn't be too hard to come by. How else did everyone get here for the World Cup?" Harry concluded.

Covelli shrugged. "There are exceptions to everything, of course. An event like the World Cup allows a wizarding government to shower gifts upon the favoured. All that is required is to place the proper coins in the proper cauldron, yes?" As she collected her luggage, she

went on, "I had forgotten the last Cup was held here. You do realise that it was in the Ministry's best interests to ease transportation in and out of the country at that time? It is quite another matter if a citizen wishes to come and go. The Strait Line is expensive, but nothing compared to the license fee for an international portkey."

Harry asked, "And the Strait Line is...?"

"Oh, dear... you truly have been isolated, haven't you?" Covelli said. "We shall have to address that." With that, she led him to what appeared to be a gatehouse for the car-park – it was no more than ten feet across. She casually let her wand slip from her sleeve into the palm of her hand and tapped the door to the gatehouse. There were several odd clicks and a groan, and then the door opened inward.

The room inside was easily twenty times the size of the exterior and filled with a dizzying array of witches and wizards, more than Harry had ever seen inside any single building excepting the Ministry or Hogwarts. He saw robes and cloaks and coats in styles he'd never before seen or imagined; people of all sizes and colours; baggage-toting creatures that made house-elves seem quite ordinary. A number of vendors were milling about with trays and cases, hawking everything from Seasickness Elixir ("Why would anyone want to be seasick?" Harry heard one wizard say) to Muggle gazetteers of England. There were at least two clothiers who had set up shop, both of whom were overburdened by wizards and witches attempting to dress as proper Muggles. A booth to one side was a perfect miniature replica of Gringotts, complete with a goblin guard; through the open doors, Harry could see two tellers doing a brisk business in currency exchange.

A tall man in what looked to be an ancient naval uniform strode into the crowd and called out, "For those with passage on the M.V. Hermes from Southampton to New York, we will begin collecting luggage at Counter Four in exactly ten minutes... ticketed passengers only, please!" With that, the man retreated to a large red counter shaped rather like the number four.

A witch nearly bumped into him as she shouted, "The Muggle autobus heading to Heathrow departs from behind the car-park in five minutes! If you've not acquired an authorised ticket, make your way to Counter One immediately!" The tall, white Counter One looked even more like a number one than Counter Four looked like a number four. Covelli took up station in a queue that led to Counter Two, which looked remarkably like the aforementioned number in blue.

"I've reserved a car," she told Harry. He nodded, too overwhelmed to say anything. They had advanced about halfway through the queue when Covelli abruptly stepped out and into the paths of a finely dressed witch and wizard.

"Will wonders never cease? Hello, Giancarlo," she said grandly.

The wizard looked up and stopped dead. "I... er... how unexpected..." he bumbled. "I didn't know you were in England..."

"Greetings to you, Mrs. Covelli - or MacLeish - or is there yet another Mr. Lucia these days?" the witch said coldly.

Covelli let forth a tinkling and undeniably false laugh. "Ah, Echidna... smashing to see you as always," she said. "Which half are you today, I wonder: nymph or snake?"

The wizard grimaced at Covelli and said, "That was uncalled for," in a perfunctory way, then added, "What brings you to England?"

"I've taken up a post at Hogwarts," Covelli said. Harry was quite certain that the unpleasant witch hissed at that.

Covelli went on, "This is my colleague..." She stopped and it was obvious to Harry that she hadn't intended to introduce him. For that matter, he hadn't considered the risk of being seen as himself amidst the wizarding public. Too late for worries now, he decided.

With his wand concealed in his left hand, he reached out with his right toward the wizard; "Harry Potter," he said casually. The man's mouth fell open. The witch managed to capture surprise and horror in a single expression.

“Carl Greengrass,” the wizard said quickly. “This is truly unexpected!”

The witch manoeuvred past and presented her hand as though it was to be kissed. Harry grasped her hand by the fingertips and bowed slightly, uncertain what else to do. She raised an eyebrow, leant her head back in a superior fashion and announced, “I am Echidna Yaxley Greengrass.”

Harry promptly returned his attention to Mr. Greengrass. “Ted Tonks mentioned your name,” he said. “It was in connection with one of my family's properties; he told me we would have been far better served if you'd been involved.”

“Is that so? Ted and I have done a good bit of business over the years,” Mr. Greengrass said. “Is he handling your affairs?”

“Some of them,” said Harry. “Would Daphne Greengrass be your daughter?”

“She would,” Mrs. Greengrass said stiffly.

“She's a year mate of mine – a fine witch,” Harry said.

“I am surprised that one of your... station... would speak well of a daughter of Slytherin House,” Mrs. Greengrass sniffed.

“What station is that?” Harry asked. “I'm the Headmaster's apprentice, that's all. As for Slytherin...? I make my opinion of a person based on what he's done, not his house.”

“Did you receive my Christmas gift last year, Echidna?” Covelli asked Mrs. Greengrass. “You failed to send a recognition of any sort.”

Mrs. Greengrass rolled her eyes. “Who would be caught dead in a short-sleeved robe?”

“Someone with nothing to hide, of course,” Covelli said in a voice cold as ice.

“Lucia!” Mr. Greengrass snapped. “Considering the choices you've made -”

“- which anyone with a sense of decorum would hide...” Mrs. Greengrass added.

“I know what you are, woman,” Covelli said. “Don't let her poison Daphne with it, Carlo.”

“You would do well to take young Mr. Potter's advice,” Mrs. Greengrass said. “I am a Slytherin, but I am not my brother.”

“Ahh, you are not one of the minions; you throw teas for them instead,” Covelli spat.

“We will never be able to reconcile, Lucia, not as long as you hold this bitterness,” Mr. Greengrass said sadly.

“I will never reconcile as long as my family stands in league with darkness,” Covelli returned with equal sadness.

“It's not like that, Luci, not at all. I don't want anything to do with any of it, and I certainly don't want that for Daphne,” Mr. Greengrass said.

“Daphne has to concern herself with the future of the House of Greengrass, as well as the Nascosto family,” Mrs. Greengrass added; “Family comes before the rest of this nasty business, or have you forgotten the meaning of family after so many years?”

“Er... we're next in line,” Harry said. “Would you like me to pass along your greetings to Daphne? I imagine I'll see her in passing next week?”

Mr. Greengrass said heartily, “Yes, that would be splendid! In fact, I'd like to take lunch with you and Ted at some point – in Hogsmeade, perhaps? Would you accept my owl post?”

“Sure, that would be great,” Harry said. He shook Mr. Greengrass's hand again. Mrs. Greengrass looked Harry up and down with an appraising eye.

With that, Harry found himself standing before Counter Two. A wild-haired witch barely taller than the blue counter peered over at him. "May I help you?" she asked.

Covelli cut in, "I have a car reserved for -"

The tiny witch's eyes bugged. "Blimey, you're him! There's a car waiting for you! Up now, mustn't keep Mr. MacLeish waiting!" She clapped her hands sharply and a hulking creature scuttled into view. "Grok, take their luggage to the third floor – third floor!" The creature sidled along and swept up their luggage into its extremely large hands.

Harry said in a sharp whisper, "Bloody hell – that's a troll!"

The witch winced. "Shhhhh! Do you know how hard it is to find a good luggage troll? He's quite sensitive, you know?"

The troll – which was really quite small as trolls went – made a face that was arguably a pout, let forth what might have been a sigh, and said in a voice that could have been sad were it not so guttural, "You follow Grok."

They followed the troll into what seemed to be an elevator, and found themselves exiting onto the third floor of the car-park a moment later. Several cars-for-hire and limousines waited there. A long lean man in a dark blue suit came forward with a sign in his hands that said "POTTER". He took one look at Harry's forehead, said, "This way, sir... madam..." and led them to the largest limousine present.

The drive to Pevensey seemed to take a very long time. Harry couldn't tell if the limousine was magically enhanced or simply of the Muggle variety; it wasn't larger inside than it had appeared, but it did move very quickly. He tried for a time to make conversation with Covelli, but she only commented that Harry had handled himself well with Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass. She became visibly more tense as the drive went on. He tried to take a short kip, but couldn't find a comfortable spot.

Eventually they left the main motorway and followed a series of ever smaller roads until they could see a hill in the distance that overlooked the sea, capped by a very old and battered-looking manor. They were ushered through two sets of gates and directed for quite a long while through trees, across a grassy plain and then up a steep curve that deposited them on the far side of the manor. It was a much larger building than he had guessed at first sight: four ivy-draped floors arranged in two massive wings. The entry was surrounded by a series of enormous tents and pallets of blocks and tiles and whatnot were stacked seemingly everywhere. The drive in front of the main entry appeared freshly laid, but the macadam was liberally strewn with mud.

The door of the limousine opened and they were assaulted by the whirs and bangs and pounding of construction. Workers hustled in and out of the tents and supplies whizzed to and fro – some by forklift and some by magic. There were perfectly ordinary-looking men in coveralls, dark-robed wizards, goblins... Harry had no idea what to think.

An older man in coveralls with a tool-laden work belt greeted them with a wave. "I'm to take you inside," he said.

"Er... quite a sight," Harry said.

"Not the usual work site, eh?" the man said with a lopsided grin. They made their way through the small city of tents and through the massive front doors.

Harry couldn't help but gape at the entry hall. The manor certainly wasn't Hogwarts, but it made the Black tower seem as if it were a cottage. He had felt magic throughout the grounds, especially around the tents – it was a sort of tingling awareness – but there was no sense of it here. The portraits didn't move. There was no immediate sign of ghosts or any of the wonderful strangeness he associated with wizarding buildings. There was in fact something that brought Privet Drive to mind: a sound, the only sound to be heard save the rap-tapping of their shoes on the marble floor and a hint of dripping water. It gnawed at him.

“What is that sound?” he whispered forcefully.

Covelli stopped, which brought their escort to a halt as well, and craned her head. “Do you speak of the low-pitched sound?” she asked. “Is it something of a hum and a grinding all at once?”

Harry placed the sound just then and gave an involuntary shudder. “Yeah, that's the one,” he said. It was the sound of the cupboard beneath the stairs.

Their escort harrumphed, “It's the air handling... 's been a week or better and we still can't mend the rattle.”

“Right...” Harry said. He rolled his shoulders to loosen them. Covelli shot him a curious look. He wasn't about to say anything.

The escort aimed them toward a set of wide and ornate stairs at the far end of the hall. Covelli seemed to take note of the artwork here and there. Harry noticed that both the stairwell and the hall were wide and open; there were few pillars or statues or other places to hide from view. He wondered who had planned it that way: the Blacks or MacLeish.

“This is ostentatious, even by Keith's standard,” Covelli said. “He has brought most of his collection. I wonder who he wishes to impress?” She gestured toward a small painting perched amidst larger ones; Harry wouldn't have paid it any mind. “See how this one is unlit? It almost hides, does it not?” she said. “It is by far the most expensive work in this hall. This is the way that Keith thinks, you see; this is the way that he displays his things. The brightest light is cast on that which matters least. That which he values is kept in shadows. Keep this to the fore, Harry.”

“Mr. Royston's on his way. I'll be takin' my leave,” their escort said. He tipped his hardhat and trudged away.

The man who appeared at the top of the stairs was nearly as wide as he was tall, and wore a sport coat made up in the most garish colours that Harry had ever seen. He was tanned and the only hair on his head was a bushy grey moustache. He stopped dead in his tracks.



“Merlin's ghost... they said it was you, Luci, but I wouldn't have believed it,” the man called out.

“Hello, Curly. It's been a long time, no?” Covelli said with a quaver in her voice. “Harry, this is Curly Royston, Keith's right hand. Curly, this is -”

Royston cut her off. “This is Harry Potter, of course,” he said, and he started down the stairs in a slow and deliberate way. “Luci's overstating things, Mr. Potter. The Vox Corporation has 22 vice presidents, and I'm one of them.”

“Arthur Pendragon had many knights and Lancelot was merely one of them,” Covelli said.

Royston let out a great snort and returned, “...and I've better judgment than that poor sod! Better to be Galahad than Lancelot, what? Best to be Sir Bors, actually.” He reached them and took Covelli's hand. “Ah, just look at you! Ninety-times out of a hundred, it's shite to say someone hasn't changed in years. You, however... I'm jealous, you know?” He rubbed his head and gave a rueful smile.

“Please! You've not had hair in all the time I have known you,” Covelli tut-tutted.

Royston moved off and gave Harry a very firm handshake. “Keith's been looking forward to this. He'd been hoping to do it earlier, but you know how it is?” He turned and led them back up the stairs. “He's using one of the dining rooms as an office during the renovations. Mind the puddles – you should switch to trainers for the weekend, Luci.”

Covelli broke into her tinkling laugh. “My heels are charmed; as you say, 'no worries'?”

Royston and Covelli fell into an easy conversation. Harry thought they seemed familiar but not close, more like his status with Seamus and Dean than his friendship with Ron or even Neville. He quickly lost interest and took in his surroundings. It seemed as though there was a camera in every nook and at every corner. They turned and made

their way down a long stone corridor with no windows. The ceiling was dripping in a few spots and there was no avoiding the water on the floor.

The only feature in the entire corridor was a single large door on the left side about halfway down. Harry felt a very strong tingling as he passed it. He let his hand trace along the stone wall as they continued on. The sensation was like static shock from metal on a cold winter's day. It faded away as they left that corridor and moved into a smaller one. The larger glass doors to either side were very modern-looking and seemed quite out of place. The doors to the left led to a north-facing balcony. He could see a dining room through the doors to the right. Large windows on the opposite wall overlooked the sea. Royston held up a hand and went inside.

A man stood at the windows, hands behind his back. He had thick steely-grey hair and strong features. He wore a Saville row suit and trainers. "Thirty-six million pounds and I have to listen to drip, drip, drip," Harry heard him say.

"You don't care for clouds nor rain, Keith, and here you sit in a dreary old manor," Royston said. "It's your money, though."

"G'day, you old bastard," Keith MacLeish snorted.

"Your guests have come," said Royston.

MacLeish turned to face the doors. He went still for a moment, but then smiled, straightened his suit jacket and made his way across the dining room. Harry quickly found his hand enveloped. MacLeish was quite tall; Harry had to raise his head to meet the man's eyes. Just as quickly, he was released.

"You're the last person I expected to see," MacLeish said to Covelli.

"I should hope so," Covelli said.

There was a long uncomfortable pause before MacLeish waved at chairs around the cluttered dining table. "Welcome to the manor, Mr. Potter," he said. "You know, I thought I was getting a rare deal from

your man Diggle, but I'm beginning to wonder if I wasn't had. It'll be a minor miracle if we're ready for the reception tomorrow. The family quarters are in good shape, though, so it's not a bad place to stay the night."

A house-elf abruptly popped into the room. It was clad in an impeccable suit coat and trousers complete with pocket watch, and Harry goggled at it. "Master MacLeish, sir -" the house-elf began.

"G'day, Bluey," MacLeish said, "and if you keep on with that 'Master' business, I'll ask you to call me Keith for a week."

Bluey shuddered. "Yes, Mister MacLeish, sir," the elf said. "Mr. Yoshi has sent the day's Yomiuri Shimbun, sir."

MacLeish looked at his watch. "Is that so...?"

"Mr. Yoshi sent make-ready sheets, Mr. MacLeish, sir," Bluey said, and he produced a stack of newsprint from thin air.

MacLeish strode back to the dining table. "Let me have at them," he said.

Bluey looked to Royston and then saw Covelli. "Madam MacLeish! B-Bluey is... is Madam really here?"

"Good day to you, Bluey," Covelli said, "and I am Dr. Covelli now – surely you recall that?"

"Madam will always be Madam MacLeish," Bluey said with certainty.

Covelli began, "And this is -"

Bluey bowed low to Harry. "Bluey knows of Harry Potter, sir," he said. "We know of Harry Potter, sir, house elves and goblins all. Bluey knows that the Manor comes from Harry Potter, sir... Bluey is not sure whether to thank Harry Potter, sir." Royston chuckled at that.

"This is the first time I've even seen the place," Harry said.

Bluey looked out the windows. “Bluey senses a storm coming – more rain and more clouds.”

“It's not the most cheerful place, what?” Royston said.

Bluey looked left and right nervously and said in what was more or less a stage whisper, “Bluey did not think we would move to Woop Woop.” MacLeish choked and Royston couldn't hold back laughter. Bluey tugged lightly on his ears and moaned, “Bluey was just saying...”

“Speak your mind, always speak your mind,” MacLeish coughed. The house-elf nodded furiously and popped away.

“So why did Nakamura send this early?” Royston asked.

MacLeish ran his finger down one of the pages. “He's making a point, and not for the first time. Summers and his crowd keep pushing the Nikkei in the weekly calls. Yoshi says it's time to get out. High operating costs, tight labor, trade restrictions, and a tight-arsed central bank... my gut says he's in the right. Thoughts?”

Royston shrugged. “Nakamura knows Japan. You know how I feel about Summers – he's useful as an ashtray on a motorbike. 'Sides, I'd take your gut in nine out of ten matches.”

MacLeish looked to Covelli. “What do you think, Lucia?”

“What do I think about Japan? I found it a lovely place to visit,” she said.

“I know you still read the papers,” MacLeish scolded.

“The confidence of the people is diminished – it shows between the lines,” said Covelli. “There is a bluster in the business pages and all the while the usual sources are quiet. These are ill omens.”

MacLeish nodded. “We start selling on Monday, then,” he said; “I'll call Yoshi myself.”

Royston made for the door. "I need to check on today's tally of fines from the Ministry," he said.

MacLeish shook his head. "Do you suppose they'd bring their dogs home if we dropped a thousand galleons per day into Fudge's coffers?"

"You know my opinion: don't bother to bribe someone you can put out of office in a fortnight," Royston said. "Splendid to see you, Luci... cheers, Mr. Potter." Harry waited until Covelli chose to take a seat and then joined her opposite MacLeish.

The silence became uncomfortable, before Covelli motioned to MacLeish and said, "Begin your presentation when you wish, Keith."

MacLeish ran a hand through his hair and laughed. "You've made an unexpected choice as an advisor, Mr. Potter. I've had several hours to think on it, and you still have me at a disadvantage. You see, if Luci weren't here, this is the spot when I would impress with everything I know about the Boy-Who-Lived... family betrayed by a friend, but not the one everyone suspected... no one left, not even a grandparent, so you were placed with your mother's sister, about whom the best I've heard is that she's the worst sort of Muggle – not that I believe it, as I rather doubt your relations are axe-murdering pedophiles, but they certainly didn't care to raise a wizard. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect old man Dumbledore actually set out to make sure your childhood mirrored that of Tom Riddle – oh, yes, I know exactly who Lord Voldemort is. I imagine there would have been an outcry over the whole matter if the old man hadn't been so free with confounding charms, obliations and the like.

"Now I'll play the devil's advocate: Dumbledore didn't want you hounded, because you would have become an arrogant bastard otherwise – not that you haven't, because I suppose you might be one beneath it all, but it would have been a sure thing if the whole wizarding world had been within reach of you. So the old man gets you to Hogwarts, keeps you on ice every summer, and puts you through one test after the next in between, and somehow you come out kind, generous, self-effacing and otherwise worthy of hero status.

All you have to do is win, and you'll be the perfect person to help Dumbledore keep the status quo in England.”

“Keith...” Covelli warned.

“Mr. Potter,” MacLeish went on, “tell me that you haven't been handed scraps of information here and there? Tell me that you know a tenth as much about the wizarding world as you should, or anything at all of the wizarding world outside of Britain. You're being set up - that much is clear. Either you will kill Lord Voldemort and die in the attempt, or you'll be victorious and become the face on Dumbledore's master plan for the future.”

“Dumbledore is many things, but he is not so callous as that,” Covelli objected.

“What do you mean, I kill Voldemort? Where did you get that idea?” Harry asked dangerously.

“Information is power, Mr. Potter, and it never ceases to amaze me that it can be bought so easily,” MacLeish said. “You were born as the seventh month died and you're quite clearly marked. I'm told there's more to it, but the rest has been elusive.”

Harry drew his wand but Covelli stilled him. “This is a dangerous game, Keith,” she said.

“Put that away, would you?” MacLeish said. “If you were to use it, you'd never make it out that door alive, and I've no wish to see you harmed. To the contrary, I have a very strong interest in seeing you do away with Riddle and his toadies – that doesn't stop with the ones with the snake on their arms, either. I'm not the only one playing dangerous games, by the way. What on Earth made you return to Hogwarts, Luci?”

“That is a professional matter and none of your concern,” Covelli said archly.

“I don't like threats. You'd better get on with this unless you want me to walk out of here,” Harry snapped.

“Fair enough, Mr. Potter,” said MacLeish. “I assume you've done some of your own homework, so you have some idea of where I stand. Europe is the last bastion of blood purity in the wizarding world, and Britain is its crown jewel. My goal is simple: to end pureblood hegemony. I want a first-generation witch or wizard as the Hogwarts headmaster within forty years. I want a first-generation Minister in twenty years. There are two ways that can happen, as I see it. If you kill Riddle, then almost anything you desire will become reality. If you want to see change, it will happen. Absent that, should Riddle win, the rest of the world will eventually rise up and eliminate him. Anyone who supports him will be purged – ergo, the purebloods will eliminate themselves.”

“You want a puppet who does what you want, or a dictator who hates what you want and is so evil that everyone will oppose him,” Harry simplified.

“I think we want the same thing, or we wouldn't be having this conversation,” MacLeish insisted. “I know you're no fan of the Ministry, especially after the last year. Fudge is still in power for two reasons: because Dumbledore wants him there, and because I haven't decided to bother having him removed. Each time I meet the man, my resolve on that slips a bit more. Should I remove him? Would that demonstrate my intentions to you? Should I set bounty hunters after Riddle, perhaps?”

“Don't do that!” Harry said.

MacLeish's brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“You'll only get them killed,” said Harry.

MacLeish eased back in his chair, and said with a predatory smirk, “You seem sure of yourself... quite sure. I shan't need to purchase the rest of the prophecy – I have my answer.”

Harry's fists clenched and unclenched. “I don't care for you, not one bit,” he said.

"Yet you would still stop a wizard from beating a house-elf, wouldn't you? You'd still treat a goblin respectfully? You'd still ally yourself with an impoverished wizarding family of good will rather than a wealthy one of bad intent? If your child was a squib, you'd still raise that child as if it were your own? You don't care for me, but you wouldn't eliminate me as a result... you won't even shut me out before I have my say. Oh, we really do want the same thing," MacLeish concluded.

"If you don't want me to like you, then what do you want?" Harry demanded.

"A full and fair hearing," MacLeish returned. "I want you to hear my reasons for upsetting the apple cart, and I will take your full measure. If that comes out as I expect, then I intend to make a proposition – a business proposition, if you like. I would also appreciate it if you would meet my daughter, Nicola."

"Is that why you brought Nicola here?" Covelli asked. "Is that why you have endangered her, why you have brought her to a place that could become a war zone at any moment?"

"You give Voldemort and his men too much credit," MacLeish dismissed her. "They're terrorists, Luci – effective ones, but terrorists all the same."

"If they are such a simple obstacle, then why did you not take action during the last conflict? Looking backward, this smacks of cowardice," Covelli said angrily.

"He was so successful last time because the Ministry had done such a brilliant job of dividing the people, and because most of the natural opposition had been virtually run out of the country in the '50s and '60s, - and you know all of that perfectly well," MacLeish fired back. "The Ministry was doing his job for him; all he and his Death Eaters had to do was pick off the dangerous opponents one by one. Dumbledore did a terrible job of prosecuting a resistance - the man needed a PR professional in the worst way, still does really. Who would I have helped? Where was the groundwork for making any sort of difference? Look at the last fifteen years, Luci: Voldemort went away and nothing happened. Nothing. This time, there's someone to



rally around, and he's sitting here with us. Only Dumbledore can muck that up, and he'll manage it if given half a chance." He looked to Harry. "If you could do one thing right now to trip up the Death Eaters, what would you do?"

"I'd round them up – arrest all of them," Harry said.

"Arrest them for what?" MacLeish asked. "For wearing a Dark Mark? The ones not in prison already used the Imperius Curse as their excuse, and the Ministry bought into it. The ones on the run are being shielded by someone – either someone wealthy or someone inside the Ministry."

"Cut off their money, then," Harry offered.

"How?"

"Have it confiscated," Harry said.

"How? Forfeiture laws? The Ministry will never pass them," MacLeish laughed.

"The goblins, then," offered Harry.

"Ah, the goblins," MacLeish said. "You don't know them, obviously - they're too factionalized. Only one thing will bring them all together, and that's a rebellion... now there's an interesting possibility."

Covelli's brows shot up. "Are you proposing to set off a goblin rebellion?"

MacLeish smiled. "If that's what it takes, why not? The British Ministry has earned a rebellion or two."

"You... you can't just come into England like a... like a typhoon and expect everything to fall before you!" Covelli spluttered.

"Britain is ready to fall, Luci – a stiff wind will do the job – and it's going to fall hard, in one direction or the other. In the end, the good lads will win. That's precisely why you're here, Mr. Potter," MacLeish

said. "I've no intention of meeting with the baddies. Riddle and I were schoolmates; at one time, I thought we were friends. I didn't know what he was, not then. Luci, she knew exactly what he was. I wish I'd known you then, Luci... I really do."

He stood and went to the windows; without looking at them, he went on, "There are more than two sides in play, however. Even now, there are dissident groups preparing to kill Voldemort's sympathisers... there are pro-Voldemort groups plotting to prop up the Ministry, and other pro-Voldemort groups plotting to take it down... there are mild-mannered wizards of good intention who would love nothing more than to kill for revenge... there are wizards who by any right should be pro-Voldemort that would love nothing more than to survive and be left alone. It's a very large, very complicated game of chess, and the pawns are already in play. Are you a pawn, Mr. Potter, or are you a knight? Or perhaps, are you the queen?"

MacLeish turned and faced them with a smile. "How are you faring with my little songbird, by the way?"

Harry leapt from his chair. "You... you set that up! You made it happen, didn't you?"

"I set the conditions, nothing more," MacLeish countered. "I gave the young lady her month of holiday, which I expected would take place very near to your tower house... arranged for her management to flush her out... used my new properties for her rehearsals and for photography and what-not... ensured that you would be able to communicate after the fact... just a few helpful conditions, Mr. Potter. You're the one who wandered into that restaurant, you're the one who found yourself attracted to someone whose story is a parallel of your own, and you discovered on your own that she's a squib with an interesting ability. It's hard to manage a human lie detector, I must say."

"Why?" Harry demanded.

"Why is it hard to manage a human lie detector? Well, that should be rather -"

“You know what I meant – WHY?” Harry said much more forcefully.

“To broaden your horizons,” MacLeish answered. “Dumbledore has been far more manipulative than I. There are perfectly good families on the right side of this conflict – Bones and Abbott come to mind – but you've been thrown at one family from the start because that family was in Dumbledore's pocket. Why not the young Bones heir as a sister figure or a prospective spouse? I'll tell you why: because Amelia Bones is too far from the old man's reach. Perhaps the Abbott girl? Donald Abbott has been on the wrong side of Dumbledore in the Wizengamot too many times. I doubt Dumbledore planned on a first-generation witch becoming close to you and the Weasleys – Granger, isn't it? - but I'll wager that the girl looks up to him as a grandfather or something of the like. You've never had opportunity to meet anyone of interest who falls outside of Dumbledore's sphere of influence, let alone an ordinary person or a squib. The fact that Magruder's father was Sirius Black... I admit that's icing on the cake.” Before Harry could cut in, he added, “You needed breathing space – not the sort that Dumbledore was willing to give, but genuine breathing space... time with someone who didn't see you as a saviour or a hero-in-the-making or something breakable. I made that happen, and I don't regret it.”

“You put her in danger!” Harry growled, even as he was pleased inside that MacLeish hadn't sussed out Heather's actual parentage.

“Life's a chance,” MacLeish said. “She's in no more danger now than she was at the age of seven, forced out onto the streets of Edinburgh in the dead of winter.”

“You honestly believe that, don't you?” Harry said in disbelief.

“Not with one-hundred-percent certainty,” admitted MacLeish. “That's why the two of you haven't appeared together on the pages of the Prophet – or one of my ordinary papers, for that matter. If you're serious about her, of course, then that will change. You're both public figures, after all.”

“I'm not serious about her, then,” insisted Harry. “She's a friend – she could have been family!”

"That's true, I suppose, if things had played differently," MacLeish said. "You'd have grown up together... hadn't considered that angle... What do you want of me? I could arrange for Obliviation, if you like: the girl, her mother, others in the know?"

Harry gave that serious consideration for a moment, but shook his head. "No... I want her away from here, as far away as you can manage," he said.

MacLeish stroked his chin thoughtfully. "My people could arrange a tour of the Far East and America, I reckon... for how long?"

"As long as it takes," Harry returned, "and I want Shona to go with her."

"How do you expect me to manage that?" MacLeish asked.

"Buy the restaurant, offer her a job... whatever you have to do," said Harry. MacLeish looked Harry in the eyes for a long time; Harry didn't flinch.

"Done," MacLeish said.

Covelli broke in, "What do you truly want of Harry, Keith, other than to antagonise him?"

"As I said, I wanted to take his measure. I've taken it, and I like what I see," MacLeish answered. "I must seem like a loose cannon to you, Mr. Potter -"

"This is because you are a loose cannon, Keith," Covelli cut him off. "What has happened to you? You are reckless now, when you were not reckless before."

"There's no time for caution – time is running out," MacLeish snapped. "Everything is converging now, Luci – can't you see it? With a few decisive events, everything I seek can come to pass. Twenty years of work..."

Covelli raised an eyebrow. "You've not had an influence in England until just now, Keith. You avoided England, in fact; I could see the pincer strategy at work."

"You've not been in England for a very long time, nor have you been active in wizarding affairs," said MacLeish. "I have been involved here, Luci – very involved. When you return to Hogwarts, see if you can't access the register of births. Look forward a few years. I think you'll be quite surprised."

"The register of births...? I do not understand..." Covelli said.

"You've been getting squibs to marry," Harry blurted out.

MacLeish gave a small smile. "Continue your thought, if you would?"

"You're interested in squibs," Harry said.

"True," admitted MacLeish.

"And you know a lot about families here – bloodlines and the like," said Harry.

"I won't deny that," MacLeish said.

"You're hoping for more Muggle-borns, aren't you?" Harry concluded.

MacLeish clapped politely. "You're rather quick, aren't you?" he said. "The pureblood families in power are breeding themselves into extinction. They're already vastly outnumbered by half-blooded and full-blooded wizards... but what would happen if there were a sudden infusion of first-generation wizards, all of them bringing a contemporary sense of the rest of the world?"

"Chaos," Covelli said flatly.

MacLeish's smile grew. "Not chaos, per se – merely an irresistible force applied to an object too small to remain immovable. There will be a revolution in Britain, Luci, whether it's borne of a victorious hero or the defeat of a vile dictator or a goblin uprising or a wave of new

wizards. Mr. Potter, it's best for all of Britain that it be borne of a victorious hero – peaceful change really is for the best. I can't tell you what to do; if you defeat Lord Voldemort, no one will be able to tell you what to do. What I can do is to give you something to ponder, other than Dumbledore's line.”

“Dumbledore is not an evil man,” said Covelli.

MacLeish shook his head in disbelief. “No, I don't think he's evil... but I can't believe you, of all people, are defending the man! He let Riddle live – you said that yourself. Where are your first-generation English friends, Luci – your Muggle-born friends? London? Edinburgh? No, they're in New York or San Francisco or Sydney.” he turned to Harry and added, “Twenty years from now, where will your Muggle-born friends be, Mr. Potter? The answer to that is in your hands, isn't it?”

Harry thought of Hermione – of what Mrs. Weasley had told the Grangers about marriage proposals and job prospects and her chances with the Ministry, of how he'd offered to spend whatever it took to change that for her. What of Dean, or Justin Finch-Fletchley, or the Creevey brothers? Even Dumbledore had said that Harry could have the power to change things for the better, once Voldemort was vanquished. Was Dumbledore really pointing Harry toward keeping the British wizarding world more or less the same? Why hadn't he directed Harry toward someone like Susan Bones? Her aunt was head of the DMLE, so surely the Bones home was quite safe. His reason might have been as simple as seeking people from Harry's own house; it was more difficult to socialise across house lines, in truth. Were the Weasleys intended to run across Harry at the entry to Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ ? How much was fate versus accident versus careful planning by the Headmaster? There was a lot MacLeish said that Harry didn't agree with, but some of it made too much sense to ignore.

“I still can't decide if you're a madman,” Harry said; “I'll listen for now - I won't be your puppet, but I'll listen.”

“Splendid!” MacLeish boomed.

“Will you listen to me, I wonder?” Covelli asked MacLeish.

MacLeish's face softened. "I always listen to you, Luci," he said.

"This reception you have planned, it is dangerous," Covelli said. "I ask you not to proceed... or at the very least, to send Nicola away from it."

"Nicola won't be a part of it, of course," MacLeish said; "it's well understood that she's ill. I've worked at that image, and you have as well."

"My concern is for the safety of all present," Covelli clarified.

"People from both sides will be attending and there'll be more security than you've ever seen in any one place. Voldemort won't be taking any free shots, not unless he wants to lose all of his financial backing," MacLeish assured her.

"If he can be rid of me, he might not worry about his supporters," said Harry.

"I've already eliminated the transition from here to Edinburgh," MacLeish said. "That's why the work around here is at such a pitch. If they can't finish in time, then we'll have it in tents on the grounds. Luci, we've had weeks to think this through. If you honestly want me to move Nicola, I'll do it, but you know how she takes a move..."

"I have no right to tell you what to do in her case," Covelli said.

"You're right, you haven't," MacLeish said immediately. "She still loves her mum, though, and I won't be the one to spoil that."

"Why, Keith – why do you so badly want Harry to see Nicola?" Covelli asked; her distress was palpable to Harry.

"So he'll understand," MacLeish said. "There's no time left for games, no time at all. I need to know he understands what I'm doing and why, and I need to know if he's the right man to back. Once he meets Nicola, I'll have my answer."

Covelli looked to Harry. She said gravely, "If you intend to do as Keith asks and be introduced to our daughter, then I must exact a promise

from you – an oath, one that cannot be broken. If you will not do this, then I will do everything in my power to prevent you from ever meeting her.”

“Dr. Covelli... I don't understand what's going on here. You... you're not afraid I'll hurt her, are you? That's absurd,” Harry scoffed.

“No, that is not my fear. Only a handful of people know the truth of this matter,” Covelli said. “I assume that all of those people are oath-bound, Keith?”

“Under pain of their own magic,” MacLeish confirmed. “Mr. Potter, I had hoped to dispense with this in your case, as a measure of trust... Luci, are you certain...?”

“I wish to trust you, Harry, but I must insist,” said Covelli.

Harry couldn't resist his own curiosity, but was still suspicious. “What sort of oath?” he asked.

“I would have you swear never to speak of what you observe while meeting with Nicola or the truth of her circumstances except to myself or Keith, or with our permission, or with the permission of our estates,” Covelli returned.

“If there's to be an oath, it would be with my permission or the permission of my estate,” MacLeish corrected her. “Nicola is in my sole care.”

“Yes, of course,” Covelli said quietly.

“I can't see what the problem would be,” said Harry. “This is your business, really.”

“You may see some rather odd things,” MacLeish said. “There are certain... legalities to consider, as well.”

“You're not doing a smashing job of talking me into this,” Harry said nervously. “Is someone trying to hurt your daughter? Is that it?”



Covelli looked Harry straight in the eyes, let down her Occlumency shields and said, "She could be in mortal danger if the wrong persons knew the truth."

"Can I help?" Harry asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't believe anyone can help, not now."

"I'm not so sure that's true," MacLeish countered.

"I swear it," Harry decided. "I shan't tell a soul what I see, not unless you say so."

"I'm satisfied," MacLeish said. "Luci?" Covelli gave the slightest of nods, and MacLeish led them from the dining room and back in the direction of the entry hall. They stopped halfway down the long stone corridor, before the door that had made Harry's hand tingle so strongly.

MacLeish withdrew an unassuming wand from within his suit coat and began a long incantation. A bluish glow encompassed the wand and the door for a moment, followed by a loud click. Behind the door was a second door, made of dark and roughened metal. Harry could feel the pulsing of what he knew to be a ward, one as strong as anything he had felt at Hogwarts. After a second incantation and a flick-and-swish, the metal door slid to one side.

Beyond the door was an enormous space, far too large to be contained inside the manor. It was like a wizarding tent gone mad. The ground – or floor, or whatever it might have been – was covered with ankle-length grass and actually rose and fell like natural terrain. There was a blue sky with light clouds overhead. To one side there was a structure, a bothy similar in size to his own. Beside the structure was the largest mushroom Harry had ever seen, surrounded by equally spaced and smaller mushrooms; the top was draped with a cloth and set with tea service for six. There were trees, and the largest had a swing hung from it. There was even a small pond.

A woman emerged from the bothy. Harry recognised her immediately: she was the mysterious woman from Cabaret Moliere, the one with

the magical coat and the odd accent. She'd had the misfortune of snogging Snape in the wake of the connection with Heather, as he remembered it. She recognised Harry as quickly, and said, "We meet again, Mr. Potter."

MacLeish stepped forward. "Harry Potter, Bret McCrary," he said; "Obviously you remember Mr. Potter, Bret."

"McCrary... oi, I tried to hire you as a tutor!" Harry said.

"I hope you didn't waste too many owls," McCrary returned. "I'm employed, as you can see. I'd rather you didn't spread that around, by the way; technically, I'm not supposed to be in England."

Harry nodded. "Dumbledore said that; he expected you might kill Snape. "

"Severus Snape? Old Dumbledore told you that, did he?" McCrary laughed. "It's an ancient family conflict between McCrary and Prince. I don't care much about the whole business. If it'll make you feel better, Potter, I'll only behead the man if he gives me cause to do it."

"Don't hold back on my account," said Harry. McCrary cocked her head for a moment and then broke into laughter.

"Who'sit, Miss Bret?" someone called out from the bothy. "Is Daddy here?" The curtains on one of the windows opened for a moment and closed as quickly, and then the door flung open. A woman bounded toward them, past Harry and nearly tackled MacLeish.

"Daddy!" she shouted. The sky abruptly cleared of clouds and Harry thought he heard birds chirping.

"Hello, Nick-Nick!" MacLeish said brightly. "Look who's here to see you..."

The woman turned in a flash and looked beyond Harry. "M-Mummy?"

"Hello, moppet," Covelli managed to say.

“Mummy's here! Mummy's here!” she exclaimed and rushed at Covelli, who hesitantly put out her arms. The woman – obviously she was Nicola MacLeish – clutched at Covelli and jumped up and down in excitement. She was taller than her mother and Harry thought that they might both topple over.

“Oh, oh, oh – Mummy, Mummy! I... I got pictures for you – you wanna see 'em, Mummy!” Nicola asked happily.

“Of course I do,” Covelli said without expression. Harry knew the look on her face: she was trying to use Occlumency in order to stay in control.

Nicola abruptly turned to MacLeish. “Daddy...? W-will you still like me if I did something bad?”

“I'll always love you, Nicola, you know that,” MacLeish said.

She lowered her head and squeezed her eyes tightly closed. “I... I... I broked-ed a wand. I didn't mean to – honest!”

“It was the one Weitzmann made for her,” McCrary said quietly to MacLeish.

Nicola didn't raise her head. “It got so hot, an'... an' my hand, it burned, so I... you still like me, Daddy?”

MacLeish walked over and pulled her into a one-armed hug. “It's all right, everything's all right,” he said.

“Itsinthepond,” Nicola blurted out.

MacLeish quirked his lips. “What's this?” he asked.

Nicola ducked her head, pointed quickly and said, “Pond.”

“Oh, Nick-Nick...” MacLeish laughed.

“It burned so I put it in water,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You did the right thing,” said MacLeish.

“An'... an' Miss Bret, she got me 'nother wand – look! Look!” Nicola said. She held up an ornate white-coloured wand that looked to be about a foot long.

MacLeish's brow furrowed. “That's... that's very nice of Miss Bret...” he said.

“An' she teached me to do things, too!” Nicola went on.

Harry was at a complete loss. Nicola MacLeish had to be about the same age as Tonks, he figured, but she was like a little girl inside a big body. Her hair was cut short and round and the fringe hung in strands down her forehead. Her eyes were large and showed everything she was thinking: wide with excitement, scrunched shut when scared. Her emotions projected so strongly that he had to join Covelli in Occlumency exercises, even though he had already reached the point where crowded Hogwarts corridors merely resulted in a faint cluttering of his mind. Nicola had Covelli's nose and cheeks and MacLeish's eyes, and her hair was a rusty reddish colour; Harry thought she might have been pretty if she didn't have a child's haircut and a child's expression on her face. That was when she noticed Harry watching her, and her eyebrows disappeared into her fringe.

“H... Har... Daddy, that's... Daddy! Oh, oh! It's Harry Potter!” she shouted, and then she clapped her hands together and her feet stomped up and down, and she sang over and over, “It's Harry Potter! It's Harry Potter!”

She stopped and ran up to him until her face was only about a foot from his. “Daddy says don't hug the boys so I have to shake your hand,” she said. Her expression turned into a parody of seriousness and she pumped his hand up and down.

“Erm... hi... Nicola,” Harry said.

Her face went blank for a moment as if she was trying to recall something, and then she lit up again. “I was playing Harry Potter... come see! Come see!” she bubbled, and pulled him by the hand hard

enough to shift his feet. He shrugged and let her take him to the bothy.

Most of the interior was an enormous bedroom filled with dolls and stuffed animals and picture books. "Do you like my room?" she asked, even as she still tugged at his arm.

The walls were of rough-hewn light-coloured wood and the space was open and bright. He wasn't entirely certain whether to address her as a child or an adult. "It's a nice room," he offered.

She took out the white wand and looked around the room for something. "Oh, there he is!" she said, and picked up a rather well-worn teddy bear. "This is Harry."

"Er... pleased to meet you, Harry...?" Harry said.

Nicola grinned at him. "Harry needs a broom... Oh! Miss Bret said I hadda use a wand," she said. He nearly ducked as she waved the wand in a random pattern. A miniature Firebolt appeared and hovered beside her.

"On you go!" she said to Harry the Bear, who clambered aboard the broom. With that, the raggedy bear began to circle the room.

"Harry has to be the Triwizard," Nicola said very seriously.

"Does he really?" said Harry.

Nicola nodded. "Oh, yes – Harry always wins!" She waggled and weaved with the wand – Harry took two steps backward – and a disturbingly realistic three-foot-long dragon appeared at the centre of the room. "That's Dragon," she said.

"Uh... hello, Dragon," said Harry. Dragon greeted Harry with a burst of fire that littered the floor with sulphurous sparks. "It actually breathes fire! That's... that's quite a dragon you have there..."

"This is the part where Dragon chases Harry," Nicola announced. Dragon engaged Harry the Bear in a dizzying aerial ballet that set

three books afire and left the Firebolt singed and a quilt on her bed torn. Before Harry could extinguish the books, Nicola wiggled the white wand and the flames disappeared. Dragon crumpled into an exhausted heap beside the bed while Harry the Bear took a victory lap and then dismounted the Firebolt into Nicola's arms.

"Good show! See? Harry always wins!" Nicola said with delight. Dragon let out a super-heated snort of disgust and then appeared to go to sleep.

Harry wondered if the entire place might be a sort of Room of Requirement, but wasn't certain how to ask. He settled on asking, "Does this room make Dragon for you?"

Nicola shook her head wildly and said, "No, silly! Dragon comes when I want. Harry flies when I want." She found a battered golden cup on the floor, handed it to Harry and told him, "You can give Harry the Cup now."

The bear reached up to take the Cup and Harry decided to give a small bow. "Congratulations, Sir Bear," he said.

"Say 'thank you', Harry," Nicola scolded. Before Harry could speak, Harry the Bear set down the cup and bowed grandly.

"You're welcome," said Harry, because he didn't know what else to do.

Nicola proceeded to show Harry every inch of her room. He was positive that she introduced him to a hundred stuffed animals, most of whom greeted him warmly. One of the picture books she showed him was about the Triwizard Tournament; he nearly pitched over in shock. It only depicted the first two tasks and it did so in a rather heroic way, but the source for her Harry and the Dragon game was clear enough. She did nearly all the talking and Harry was happy to observe because he was less likely to say or do something wrong. She was nearly as excitable as Dobby, he decided. As time went on, he noticed that she seemed to lean slightly to one side and that her face drooped just a bit on that same side, but it didn't keep her from smiling almost continuously. By the time MacLeish came and suggested that Nicola go to her mother, Harry was exhausted. He let

himself be led out to the mushroom-table and the mushroom-chairs. McCrary joined them there.

Harry took a seat and immediately jumped to his feet. "Bloody hell – these are real!" he shouted.

"They're comfortable as well," MacLeish said. "Sit. You're knackered."

Harry asked MacLeish straight out, "Is this a Room of Requirement?"

"A what?" MacLeish returned. Harry explained the Room to MacLeish, who hadn't encountered it during his Hogwarts days and clearly wished that he had.

"Everything here is real," McCrary said, and she admitted, "The first time she decided her room should be a castle for the day, it scared the hell out of me."

Harry looked around the room in awe. "I don't understand... look, I don't want to be rude, but what happened to her?"

MacLeish's face went stony and when he spoke, his voice was flat and tight. "Nicola was oxygen-deprived at the end of Luci's pregnancy and severely so during the birth. She had a stroke shortly after she was born, as well. An ordinary child would likely have died within a few hours. Magical children are different, of course. It was several hours before she was responsive. The doctors were shocked by it all. We didn't know the extent of what happened until we took her to a healer. She wasn't growing as she should, you see..."

Harry cut in, "Er... if you'd rather not -"

"I have to tell it," MacLeish said; "You need to hear this." He took a long breath and his jaw tightened. "The healer informed us that Nicola's brain was damaged and that she would never develop properly. He proceeded to inform us that under the Enfeeblement Clause of the International Statute of Secrecy, we were required to give her up to the local Ministry. I asked what would become of her, and he said... he said that in Switzerland – that's where we were at

the time – she would be placed in a locked ward. He warned us not to return to Australia or Britain, because they would... they would...”

McCrary patted MacLeish's forearm and said to Harry, “If she'd been born at St. Mungo's, they would have administered a lethal potion on the spot.”

“A lethal... they would have killed her?” Harry gasped.

“They're afraid of the unintentional magic,” McCrary explained. “A witch like Nicola doesn't necessarily grow out of it, right? In America, she would have been raised as a Muggle, hoping that it would go away eventually – like it does for an untrained Muggle-born.”

“Couldn't they obliviate her or something?” Harry asked. “What about something to suppress her magic?”

“What would you obliviate?” McCrary asked. “Magic wasn't a conscious thing for her -”

“She didn't understand that she was doing it until she was thirteen or fourteen -,” MacLeish said.

“And the idea of potions or artifacts that suppress magic is a myth, nothing more,” McCrary finished.

“If they existed, I would have found them,” said MacLeish. “Obviously, I had the healer obliviated to within an inch of his life. As far as the wizarding world is concerned, Nicola suffered a severe case of dragon pox as a young child and is too frail to appear in public. Dragon pox can leave children as squibs, and a lot of people assume that's what happened to her.” His face reddened and he added, “A pureblood who I won't name once asked me why I didn't 'cause her to go away', since a squib daughter wasn't good for anything other than a kidnapping target.”

“I don't... I don't know what to say,” Harry managed.

“Bret, I need to speak with Mr. Potter alone,” MacLeish said. McCrary nodded and walked away.



MacLeish pounded his fist on the mushroom-table, hard enough to scatter the tea service. His eyes were wild. "That's the world you live in, Harry! It's a world where innocent children are poisoned to death because they don't measure up. Here in England, they probably would have sought out your Muggle-born friends and poisoned them if they could have gotten away with it. It's all right for a Slytherin to raise his children in hopes that they get a fucking Dark Mark when they grow up, though... that's fine in people's eyes, as long as there are galleons to be had under the table. I've done what I can in the rest of the world. Australia's become a model for the integration of Muggle-borns and squibs. Europe's the toughest nut to crack, and I'll damn well crack it. When that's done, the Statute for Secrecy is next."

"Someone told me that you want to bring us all out into the open," Harry ventured.

"Not tomorrow or next year, but yes, that's my eventual goal," MacLeish said.

Harry immediately objected, "The world's not ready for that – it would be a disaster!"

MacLeish smiled. "As I said, not tomorrow. The world's unprepared for it because no one's ever attempted to prepare it. If people can accept the idea of aliens, they can accept magic if given time and opportunity." He turned and looked toward Nicola. "I want to take my daughter for a simple walk in a park; that's not too much to ask of the world. It's unlikely to happen in my lifetime, and I know that. I'm nearly seventy, Harry, and I have health issues. My father was sixty-six when he died and my mother's family were short-lived as wizards go. Someone else will have to look after Nicola ten years from now, and she may live another hundred. She'll be able to walk free someday if I have to spend every last cent, if I have to call in every favour I'm owed, and if I have to personally pressure every leader in the world - wizarding or ordinary."

"You want my support, then," Harry said.

"I wanted a fair hearing," MacLeish corrected him, "and I've gotten it. Of course I'd like your support, but you have to survive Lord Voldemort and his men first. You'll need to tell me how I can help you in that. If I can't have your support, I hope you'll consider staying clear of the whole issue..."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "There's something else," he said.

"A favour," MacLeish said. "Would you be willing to look in on Nicola from time to time? She's wanted to meet you for quite a long time, you see? She's not always this happy, Harry. A simple visit from time to time... I'd appreciate it. It's not tit-for-tat, either; I'll take care of Magruder and her mother whether or not you agree."

"Look at what I can do, Daddy!" Nicola called out. "Come quick! Come here, Harry Potter!" Harry eased himself off the mushroom-chair – he didn't want to brace against the mushroom-table to do it – and followed MacLeish toward the pond.

Nicola held out her white wand, pointed it at the bothy and said, "Akko Harry the Bear!"

McCrary said gently, "It's Accio, Nicola – Accio. Go on, give it another try."

Nicola took an exaggerated breath, screwed up her face in concentration and shouted, "Accia Harry the Bear!"

"You're almost there," McCrary said. "Accio."

Nicola nodded furiously and mouthed the word over and over. "Acci... Acci... Accio Harry the Bear!" The bear flew out the door of the bothy and sailed into her arms.

McCrary smiled and told her, "Well done, Nicola – very well done."

Nicola clutched the bear tightly and said brightly, "See, Daddy? I used-ed a wand!"

Covelli's eyes were wide. MacLeish said approvingly, "I see that, sweetheart."

"Did you see, Harry Potter?" Nicola asked.

"I did see," said Harry. "I'm glad you brought Harry instead of Dragon."

"Dragon don't like water. 'Sides, Dragon went home," Nicola said.

MacLeish said, "It's almost time for supper. We'll see you later?"

"Is Mummy coming back?" Nicola asked desperately.

Covelli nodded. "I'll see you again," she said.

"Why aren't we having supper here?" Harry asked. "Are there other guests?"

MacLeish stopped cold for a moment. "No, not tonight... I can't think of any reason... shall we have supper with you tonight, Nick-Nick?"

Harry thought Nicola's face might split from her smile. "Oh, Daddy!"

McCrary said, "I'll arrange it," and headed toward the warded door. Harry followed her closely.

"That's not a wand, is it?" he asked when they were a fair distance from Nicola and her parents.

"She's burned or blown up a hundred wands or more," McCrary said. "It's just a pretty stick. I'm trying to make her think she's using a wand, understand?"

Harry did understand. "If she believes she needs it, you think her magic might settle down?"

McCrary shrugged. "I'm hoping the idea that magic uses spells and words might sink in. I had to try something to help her."

"I thought you were a Defence teacher," Harry said. "Why are you doing this?"

"A teacher? No, I wasn't a teacher. This was just another job – a good-paying one. I wasn't hired for this, but Keith ran short of staff and I took a rotation. I've never looked back," McCrary returned. "She needs people who won't quit on her. Some of the minders she's had... I'll tell you this much: if anyone even considers hurting her, I'll kill them on the spot." As she unsealed the door, she added, "That includes you, Potter."

It was a simple supper, the sort Harry might have found in any ordinary home on a typical evening. Nicola looked as if Christmas had come early. Covelli was a blur of emotions thinly concealed. When the supper was finished and the talking died down, they bade Nicola goodbye – she tried to be brave about it but her distress nearly put Harry to his knees for a moment. Harry told Nicola that he would see her again and he swore that MacLeish's eyes twinkled, though under the circumstances it wasn't irritating. When they left and the doors were sealed, MacLeish had he and Covelli shown to the guest quarters.

Covelli waited in the corridor as their escort left. When he was gone, she said to Harry, "Now you have seen her. Keith explained the circumstances, yes?"

Harry nodded. "All of it," he said.

"What are your thoughts on her?" Covelli asked.

"She's... sweet," Harry decided. "I'll visit her again when I'm able."

Covelli arched an eyebrow. "That is all?"

"Why did you and MacLeish split up?" Harry asked boldly. "Was it over her?"

"You have seen one side of the matter," Covelli insisted. "I have seen her level a room when a toy was taken away. She would never set out to attack anyone or anything. Would you not say this of your

friend Lupin as well? I believe her magic has become innate, Harry – it is possible that she could kill with a thought. Nicola is no safer than a werewolf at the full moon. Even Keith understands the danger; she has spent her life in the most pleasant prisons that could be purchased.”

“But you still love him, don't you? I could feel it. I don't understand...” Harry said.

“I was broadcasting my emotions? Ah, it is of no matter,” Covelli said; her voice shook. “If Keith told you of everything, then he told you of the healer in Switzerland. I felt that we should bring Nicola to England for the potion. Keith knew this, and there was no going back from it.”

Harry was dumbfounded. “You... you... but the potion...?”

Covelli said fervently, “Nicola lives in her own locked ward. She is without friends. When she is an old woman, she will still be a child – a terribly dangerous child. She can Apparate. Did Keith tell you this? This is why she lives behind six inches of cold iron, and why she is allowed neither globe nor maps. Her power continues to grow, just as it does in a young child. I have no idea if it will ever stop. She is innocent and without guile. What if someone of ill intent was able to secure her trust? There is a reason for the law, Harry – it did not come to pass in a vacuum, even if Keith believes it to be otherwise.”

Harry asked, “Do you still think that? If you had it to do over, would you still...?”

Covelli's eyes went wild and for a moment Harry thought she might slap him. Her hand came down and she closed her eyes; they were rimmed with tears.

“Yes,” she said. “Good night, Harry.”

## Chapter Thirty-eight

### RUE BRITTANIA

September 21, 1996

After a terse and mercifully brief breakfast, Harry had little if anything to do. He wasn't especially interested in what the workmen were doing nor did he wish to stand in their way. He spent the balance of the day with his books and papers – writing a scroll for Croaker, drafting a strategy for Flitwick, going over the plans for the Defence Club, reading ahead for Detheridge and making notes for his sessions with Dumbledore. His schedule was far fuller than it had ever been, but it didn't seem a drudge to him. Hogwarts exerted a different sort of pressure now. He wasn't competing for marks anymore; his final examination would be scored based on survival. Oddly, he found this challenge more comfortable than his previous five years of study.

At four o'clock, he was interrupted by a knock at the door to his guest room. MacLeish's house elf, Bluey, stood at the door with an armload of long plastic bags. "Bluey is pleased to bring Mr. Potter garments for this evening," he said.

"Come in, come in," Harry said quickly. He had planned to wear his dark suit, but wasn't surprised that MacLeish would provide something for him. Bluey snapped his fingers; one of the bags vanished and the clothing within was hung in an armoire Harry hadn't noticed. The tuxedo reminded Harry of his dress robes for the Yule Ball during his fourth year. There was a small velvet case at the bottom of the armoire. Harry opened it to find two pins.

"Mr. MacLeish provides these pins for Mr. Potter," Bluey explained. "These are the crests of Mr. Potter's noble houses."

Harry looked over the tuxedo and grimaced at the bowtie. "I think I can tie one of these..." he said.

“Bluey ties them for Mr. MacLeish – best Mr. Potter keeps that to himself,” the house-elf said quietly. “Madam MacLeish ties the ties for Mr. MacLeish in days past.”

“You like her, don't you – Lucia, I mean?” Harry said.

Bluey said, “Yes, Mr. Potter. Madam MacLeish is good for Mr. MacLeish,” then added not quite under his breath, “even if they fight like two kneazles in a trunk.”

“Oh, I like you,” Harry chuckled.

“Mr. Potter is too kind. Mr. MacLeish greets you and Madam in the entry hall at fifteen minutes to the hour,” Bluey said with a bow and then disappeared with the faintest of pops.

Harry gave five fruitless minutes of attention to his hair – which was especially uncooperative – before he turned to his bowtie. After a dozen attempts, he wished for a talking washroom mirror that had some idea of how to tie a proper knot. He was happy to be interrupted by a soft rapping at the door.

Covelli was wearing an off-white dress without sleeves and cut low enough in the front to favour a quite expensive-looking pendant. She looked Harry up and down, and stopped on the bowtie draped limply across his shoulder. “It is rather different than a Windsor knot, yes?” she said.

“I think the one with my dress robes must have been charmed,” Harry grumbled.

“Allow me,” Covelli said, and she proceeded to put the bowtie in perfect order in a single attempt.

“Er... thank you,” Harry said.

Covelli gestured to the corridor. “Keith's protocol staff will have a difficult evening, I fear,” she said. “It would be best if we made our way to the hall.”

They found MacLeish pacing at the foot of the large stairs. The hall was spotless. There were rows of hors d'ouvres to each side, stations to serve drinks, and a small army of people attending to details that were unfathomable to Harry. He figured that if MacLeish's intention was to impress, then this should manage the job nicely.

"There you are!" MacLeish exclaimed. "We sent out entire wardrobes – entire bloody wardrobes! How difficult can it be to dress oneself? At least women's dress robes come close to blending..."

"Oh, dear..." Covelli said.

"I've four people working the reception tent, and at this rate it'll be midnight before we get everyone past," groaned MacLeish.

"Keith... it may be for the best to keep the gatherings separated," Covelli said.

"I've already separated the social hours and the meals," MacLeish admitted, "and only a few of us will be going between the two. There's no practical way to carve up the performance. I don't care if they can't talk with an ordinary without being tongue-tied; they just need to look the part. Could you...?"

Covelli sighed, "Very well; I shall see what you have wrought." She left for the tent outside, and MacLeish led Harry to a room just off the corridor that joined the doorway and the entry hall itself. There was a bar in one corner, from which a manservant was prepared to serve drinks.

"We'll be pulling aside some of the guests – dignitaries and the like – so they can be introduced," MacLeish explained. "You'll enter just before I do. This is a chance for you to meet some of the wizarding elite, not just from Britain but from around the world. Let's take advantage of it, shall we?"

The room filled and in short order, MacLeish was leading Harry around the hall from one wizard to the next. Harry was surprised at how many of the guests had come from abroad. Some were investors in MacLeish's magical ventures around the world and others were



public officials of various stripes. After several introductions, MacLeish was drawn into a conversation about American wizarding radio that Harry could barely follow. He moved to slip away just as Dumbledore entered. If he hadn't already seen the Headmaster with his beard and hair shortened back in St. Ebb, Harry might have missed him entirely. It was the Headmaster's guest who took Harry by surprise.

"Ron?"

"Harry! Quite a crowd, isn't it?" Ron returned.

"You're looking dashing today, Harry," Dumbledore said. "That applies to you as well, of course, Mr. Weasley."

Ron, who was perfectly dressed, shrugged. "It's not maroon, there's no lace and I don't look like a goblin on parade," he said.

"I'm glad you're here, mate, but... er..." Harry started.

"I thought it might be helpful if a familiar face or two were present," said Dumbledore. "And thus Mr. Weasley is spending the evening completing a special assignment for the Headmaster. That in and of itself should be good for a common room story or two, I imagine?"

"Amazing..." Ron said. "Quidditch stars... that bloke over there's the sporting reader for the WWN, I think... is that Celestina Warbeck?"

"Where?" Dumbledore asked.

"There, with that... um... that's a hat, isn't it?" said Ron.

"That is Miss Warbeck indeed," Dumbledore said, "and I can think of nothing suitable to say about that hat. Nonetheless, we shall be gentlemen on this occasion and keep our amusement to ourselves. If you will excuse me, I should see if Mr. MacLeish and his courtiers might benefit from my assistance."

"This should be fun to watch," Harry murmured.

“Is Dumbledore always like this?” Ron asked.

Harry kept his eyes on the Headmaster. “Like what?” he said absently.

Ron shrugged. “You know, like he's being today – funny, friendly, that sort of thing?”

“Sometimes,” Harry said.

Dumbledore appeared almost jovial as he approached MacLeish. MacLeish met Dumbledore with an equal smile and an engaging handshake. The surprise of the assembled witches and wizards was palpable.

Ron squinted at the other side of the room. “Neville?” he called out.

Neville raised a hand. “Harry! Ron...?”

Harry clapped Neville on the shoulder. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Same as you, I expect,” Neville said. “Gran insisted that I come – gave the Headmaster a right tussle over it. Susan Bones is here somewhere as well, and Serena Fawcett – she was a Ravenclaw, remember? – and a few others, as well...”

“Mr. Urquhart? Madam Urquhart? If you please...?” someone called. A younger student who Harry dimly recognised and a woman who looked to be his mother made their way to the door from the anteroom to the entry hall. They stood framed in the door as a polished voice announced, “Mr. Quentin Urquhart, fourth year student in Slytherin House at Hogwarts School and Heir Presumptive to the House of Rackharrow, accompanied by his mother, Madam Ursula Urquhart.” With that, they strolled into the hall.

Susan Bones emerged from the crowd. “I should have known you'd be here, Harry,” she said with a smile. “Father, this is Harry Potter.”

A man of similar height to his own with Susan's hair extended a hand. "Leonard Bones, Mr. Potter. My daughter speaks highly of you, as does my sister."

"I like Madam Bones," said Harry; "She's honest."

"This MacLeish certainly knows how to put on a spectacle, eh? I haven't seen anything on this scale since... well, since 1981. What do you think of all this?" Mr. Bones asked.

Harry said, "He wants to show his influence. He has interesting ideas."

"Is that so? I'd like to hear about it some time," said Mr. Bones. "At any rate, I couldn't miss a chance to escort my Susie to the biggest event of the year."

"Dad!" Susan said as she flushed.

Ron and Mr. Bones made small talk about Quidditch and Susan nervously downed two drinks before their names were called. "Mr. Leonard Bones, 6th Lord of the Noble and Most Respected House of Bones, accompanied by his daughter, Miss Susan Bones, Heiress Presumptive to the Noble and Most Respected House of Bones and Inheritor of the House of Marchbanks."

Ron turned to Neville but was quickly distracted. "Will you look at that? Didn't expect to see him here..."

"Mr. Viktor Krum, Seeker for the Bulgarian National Team and newly signed by the Fitchburg Finches Quidditch Club, accompanied by Her Royal Highness Emilia, Master Enchantress, Duchess of Solversborg and daughter of Christian III, the Muggle King of Sweden."

"Bloody hell!" Ron said, loudly enough to attract attention; "And how did Fitchburg pick him up, anyway? I can't believe Vrastra would let him go!"

"Krum doesn't aim low, does he?" Neville said. "I'm sure you'd agree, Harry, since you're aiming at Hermione these days."

“Aren't you the cheeky one?” said Harry.

“I took a shot from the bar,” Neville whispered. “Don't tell Gran – she'd flay the skin off my back.”

“A shot? Do you mean firewhiskey?” Ron asked.

Neville snorted, “I'm not stupid; steam rushing from my ears might be a bit obvious, what?”

“Dunno... doesn't sound so bad,” Ron said nervously.

Neville slung his arms around Ron and Harry. “Morgana's tits! Is that who I think it is?” he blurted out.

Ron gave a sad sigh. “I'd heard he was out of St. Mungo's. Hermione mentioned seeing him, didn't she?”

“Not to me, at least that I remember,” Harry said. “I can't believe that git's running free.”

“Mr. Gilderoy Lockhart, best-selling author of 'Joined Up Letters: Rediscovering the Real Me and How the Wizarding World Should Be’, and assistant director and chief spokeswizard for the Dark Forces Defence League.”

Ron turned to Neville. “Er... Morgana's tits...?”

“Just slipped out,” Neville winced. “Looks like it's my turn – I'd best stop hiding from Gran.”

“He really did have something from the bar, didn't he?” Ron said in disbelief as Neville drifted away.

“Mr. Neville Longbottom, sixth year student in Gryffindor House at Hogwarts School, Heir Presumptive to the Noble House of Longbottom and the House of Croaker and Inheritor of the House of Castor, accompanied by Madam Augusta Longbottom, Matriarch of

the Noble House of Longbottom and the current year's chair for the Daughters of the Goblin Wars."

And so it proceeded, one after the next, until few remained. One of those was a girl he knew that he'd seen around Hogwarts, who looked to be quite alone. Harry took a deep breath and made his way to her. "Hello," he said, "You're...?"

The dark-haired girl bore herself up and shook his hand. "Serena Fawcett; I know who you are, of course," she said, and then turned to Ron. "You're a Weasley, aren't you?"

"Ron Weasley," he said and put out his hand.

"Are you here on your own?" Harry asked.

Serena nodded. "I hate society functions," she said. "It's hard to fathom I tried to put my name in the Goblet of Fire, isn't it? I'd rather have faced a dragon than to have come here, but my aunt insisted."

"My brothers tried to enter; it didn't go so well for them," Ron said.

"Yes, we had matching white beards for a time. I should have known better, but I thought I had a charm that would do the trick," she said.

"It's just as well for you that it didn't work," Harry said flatly.

Serena paled and said, "Oh, sorry... it wasn't my intention..."

"It's nothing," Harry waved her off.

"You could walk with us if you like?" Harry said abruptly to Serena.

"It might be taken a bit odd were I to enter with two men in tow, wouldn't you think?" she returned.

Ron said, "Wouldn't have thought of that... look, why don't you go in with Harry? It really isn't a bother..."

Serena stopped him. "How would you like to create a stir, Weasley? We can be uncomfortable together, if you like?"

"Are you sure?" Ron asked. "I mean, I'm glad to do it but I wouldn't want you to think I'm... er..."

"It goes without saying that you're absurdly brave. If you've spent five years standing at Harry Potter's side and he hasn't turned you away, then it stands to reason that you're a loyal friend and certainly not a gold-digger," Serena said. "Why wouldn't I wish to be seen with you? Shall we?"

Ron pursed his lips, and then said with a shrug, "Why not? You really think there'll be a stir?"

"Oh, most definitely," Serena said. Harry and Ron approached the staffer closest to the door, who appeared annoyed but scribbled changes on two cards.

"Miss Fawcett?" the staffer called.

"Are you ready for this?" Serena asked Ron uncertainly.

"Erm... sure?" Ron said, and she let out a nervous giggle.

"Miss Serena Fawcett, Heiress Presumptive to the Noble and Studious House of Fawcett... accompanied by Mr. Ronald Weasley, captain and Keeper of the Gryffindor House Quidditch Club, and known across the wizarding world for the mid-air rescue of his sister from the clutches of the notorious terrorist Peter Pettigrew."

Ron caught Harry's eye and mouthed in a panic, "Studious?"

Harry had to turn away to keep from laughing. He did wonder what it really meant to be an Heiress or a Master or a Lord in wizarding terms; it was one more thing that no one had ever bothered to explain. His thoughts were disturbed by the shrill voice of Minister Fudge, who was in the midst of a tirade launched at Dumbledore. Covelli looked on in amusement. A woman Harry presumed to be Madam Fudge watched in discomfort.

“Now see here, Dumbledore, I'm the Minister for Magic! I shan't have a schoolmaster follow my introduction!” Fudge blustered.

“I am somewhat more than a schoolmaster; you must admit that much,” said Dumbledore.

“Dumbledore -” Fudge began

Dumbledore held up his hands. “Cornelius, if you had been listening previously, then you would have heard clearly that I have already conceded your argument. Surely you do not believe that the order of introductions is of any significance to me?”

Fudge stood there for a moment with a look on his face that somehow reminded Harry of Aunt Marge's dog, before he straightened his coat and said, “Well... well... that's settled then, isn't it?” Dumbledore whispered something to Covelli, who responded with tinkling laughter, and left Fudge in consternation. They took their places before the door.

“The Honourable Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards; Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot of Scotland and England; Headmaster of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; Grand Sorcerer; Master Alchemist; and honoured with the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his defeat of the Dark Lord Grindelwald... accompanied by Doctor Lucia Covelli, practitioner of Muggle healing arts; instructor of the History of Magic at Hogwarts School and apprenticed to the school in alchemy and historical research; and recipient of the Order of Merlin, Third Class.”

There were noticeable intakes of breath at the references to alchemy for some reason. Harry shook that off and half-listened to Fudge's interminably long introduction. The room was emptied now and he expected that he would be next.

MacLeish moved smoothly beside him. “Your friend Weasley went with the Fawcett girl, eh?” he said. “It's just you and me, then. After you?” Harry took his place hesitantly and the man with the polished

voice looked over a card, then looked at Harry, and then returned his eyes to the card.

“Harry Potter -”

The hall went abruptly quiet and hundreds of pairs of eyes turned to face the corridor. Harry forced a smile onto his face. The speaker licked his lips and began again.

“Harry Potter, 13th Lord of the Noble and Courageous House of Potter; 21st Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black; Inheritor of the Houses of Wright, Molyngton, Piggott, Waldegrave, Bartelot, Grimsby, Milhollen, Bennet, Farthing, Stanwix, Boothby and Henshawe; and apprenticed in specialised studies to the Honourable Albus Dumbledore.”

Harry knew all of that from the Potter tapestry that he and Luna had examined, but it was startling to hear it aloud. He nearly caught his foot on the corner of a rug. The applause that erupted ranged from enthusiastic to perfunctory; all Harry knew for certain was that it was loud. As he looked into eyes filled with greed, laud, lust, disgust, and hope, it occurred to him that perhaps being introduced simply as The-Boy-Who-Lived wasn't so awful after all. He found himself shaking hands with people he'd never seen before, and then was quickly flanked by Dumbledore and Covelli in such a way that the message to the crowd was clear: stay clear of Harry Potter unless invited. The speaker lightly cleared his throat – just enough via the Sonorus charm that he captured everyone's attention – and then announced,

“Your host for the evening is Mr. Keith MacLeish, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Vox Corporation, a 1945 graduate of the Hogwarts School from Gryffindor House, and the new publisher of The Daily Prophet.”

MacLeish made his way into the hall without making any remarks. He shook hands with Minister Fudge and Dumbledore, before the speaker finished by saying, “Please avail yourselves of refreshments. The evening meal will begin in forty minutes.”



Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder. "A spectacular event, is it not?" the Headmaster said; "I recommend that you take a moment for an Occlumency meditation. The machinations of others in several languages can be quite oppressive."

"Is that why I'm looking for an exit?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps so," said Dumbledore. "Take a moment to still yourself and shut out all the conflicting thoughts in the room." He waited patiently whilst Harry closed his eyes and put himself through one of Covelli's calming exercises.

When he was finished, Dumbledore added, "This event calls to mind a gathering of the International Confederation: instructive but tedious. Tell me, Harry – what do you believe is happening around us?"

Harry saw Fudge stood to one corner, immersed in conversation with a coterie of witches and wizards. "MacLeish is making Fudge look like an idiot," he said.

"And that should matter to whom?" Dumbledore asked.

"The people he's speaking with, I suppose?" Harry returned.

"Some of those are his sycophants, but others are less closely tied," observed Dumbledore. "This is a rare opportunity to contrast Minister Fudge with his international counterparts. Mr. Robbins, the Australian minister, has already ingratiated himself with most assembled here, including those now with Minister Fudge. It doesn't do at all to pale against the colonials, I assure you. Even Mrs. Grolier, the consul from the American government, appears weightier than our Mr. Fudge this evening. What else do you see?"

"MacLeish wants to show he has power," Harry said.

"Clearly, but to whom?" asked Dumbledore.

"Fudge...?"

"Certainly."

"Fudge's supporters...?"

"Quite so."

"The wizards from other countries...?"

"This is an opportunity to strengthen his influence, yes, although that does not come with risk."

"To me, I suppose..."

"That is clear."

"To the other students he invited?"

"He would seem to be cultivating your generation. I was not pleased by the prospect of allowing students leave during the term, but would have looked petulant by objecting," Dumbledore said. "What if I were to tell you that a fair number of my school colleagues from around the world are in attendance?"

"Is that how he's putting on for you?" Harry wondered.

"In that he may be making a statement about the quality of your tuition, yes... yes, I do believe you are correct," agreed the Headmaster. "Do you see how persons with sympathies leaning to both sides of the fight with Voldemort are present? He is making it plain that he is open to speaking with anyone. At the same time, he shows a bias toward international cooperation, freedom of commerce and freedom of enquiry. For most, these are difficult points with which to disagree, but they do seem to set Mr. MacLeish against Voldemort. Do you think this to be accurate?"

"I think he's on his own side, honestly," Harry said.

Dumbledore smiled. "Perhaps this sort of thing is your cup of tea?" he said. "If I might have a few minutes of your time, there are a few of my colleagues and friends whom I should like you to meet."

Now it was Dumbledore who led him through introductions. Instead of being introduced as MacLeish's business partner, he was now the Headmaster's apprentice. He was introduced to Mrs. Grolier, who identified herself as the wizarding attaché for the American embassy; and to Mr. Robbins, the Australian Minister. Harry shook hands with Amos Diggory, who was cordial but visibly uncomfortable. There was a quick exchange with Madam Bones; she reminded Harry that they needed to establish a regular meeting regarding his affairs. He also met a man introduced only as Mr. Whyte, who was apparently the head of the Department of Mysteries. Mr. Whyte seemed untroubled by the damage wrought in June, but eyed Harry rather like a walking laboratory experiment. Dumbledore took him past several of the wizarding nobles, some of whom he had already met.

The rest were the Headmaster's counterparts from around the world. Most of them ran together in Harry's mind, excepting John Bear. Bear was the principal of the Rogue River School for Shamans and Sorcerers. He said that the school was in Arcadia but then talked of the Rocky Mountains, which Harry understood to be in America. His manner was casual and his dark suit was of a cut Harry had never before seen. There was something about the way he spoke that captivated Harry, something powerful and unclouded. Bear mentioned that the next conclave of the International Confederation would be held in Arcadia and he invited Dumbledore to bring Harry for a visit. Dumbledore was unreadable on the matter but Harry hoped that it might happen.

MacLeish caught up with them. "Hello, Dumbledore," he said. "Listen, I've someone at the other reception who Harry must meet."

"Ahh, this is about Mr. Lowell?" Dumbledore asked.

"Edward's a good man for Harry to know," MacLeish said.

"Lowell... Edward Lowell... you want me to meet the PM?" Harry realised.

"Right in one, Harry," MacLeish said jauntily.

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. MacLeish led him toward the doors and outside to one of the massive tents; Dumbledore followed them. MacLeish gave a nod to two men standing at the entry to the tent; they gave way, and the three of them entered the crowded tent.

“I have met the man on one occasion, in the company of Minister Fudge,” said Dumbledore. “He seemed bright and rather decisive. Mr. MacLeish may offer an introduction, or I may do so. Which would you prefer?”

Harry searched the room for the Prime Minister, whose face he knew from the telly. Lowell was near the centre of the tent, shaking hands with a throng of people despite being surrounded by several black-suited men. Harry thought for a long moment, and then said, “I’ll manage it myself.”

“Harry... I am not sure that would be the wisest course...” Dumbledore said.

“His security is expecting me –” MacLeish began.

Harry shrugged. At that moment, a knot of guests drifted past; he took the opportunity and darted forward before either man could follow. He worked his way into the crowd around the Prime Minister, and was very surprised to see one of the men in black suits.

“Shacklebolt?”

The bald wizard nodded in recognition. “Hello, Potter,” he said; “Mr. MacLeish said you’d be dropping by. Mr. Prime Minister...?”

The Prime Minister gave a practiced smile and extended his hand automatically. “Good evening,” he said to Harry.

“Hello, sir... erm... I’m Harry Potter,” Harry offered.

Prime Minister Lowell crooked an eyebrow and turned to Shacklebolt. “This is Harry Potter?”

“He’s much more than he appears,” Shacklebolt returned.

"I see you shook off MacLeish," Lowell noted.

"I can speak for myself," said Harry.

"If half of what I've heard is true, I've no doubt. Walk with me," the Prime Minister said. With a nod, four of the black-suited men took up places around them. Shacklebolt remained behind. Harry let himself be led out of another door from the tent and to a large limousine.

"Let's sit for a while, Mr. Potter," Lowell said. One of the guards moved to open a side door, and Harry followed Lowell inside.

Despite feeling at a remove from both the wizarding and Muggle worlds, Harry couldn't help but feel a thrill at meeting the PM. Edward Lowell was a popular and powerful figure. He was Britain's first true wartime PM since Churchill, and many older Englishmen compared him favourably to his famous predecessor. If it weren't for the Scottish Problem, he would have faced only a semblance of opposition.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir... er, Your Honour...?" Harry began.

The PM laughed aloud. "Your Honour... oh, that's rich! 'Mr. Lowell' will do nicely," he said.

Harry cleared his throat and then asked, "What can I do for you, Mr. Lowell?"

"I'm well informed of your world, Mr. Potter – better than any of my fellows in a century or more, I'll wager," Lowell said.

"Do you have a squib in your family?" Harry wondered.

"A squib... that's one of your sort with very little magic, is that it? No, I've no squibs in my past – at least none of whom I'm aware," Lowell said. "Your man Fudge gave me the customary briefing a month or so after I took office. A few weeks later, MacLeish revealed himself to me. I take what he says with fair suspicion, but he has made some useful contacts for me. He also discovered that a childhood friend of mine attended your school; she and I take tea now and again."

“So you know about me...?” Harry ventured.

“Not only does my old friend have interesting tales to tell, but my office takes both of your magical papers,” Lowell returned. “I don't entirely know what to make of all of this, in truth. If there's one certainty, it's that there's no middle ground about you: either loved or reviled. I respect that in a man – it means you're not afraid to speak up.”

“I do my best,” Harry said nervously.

“I imagine that you do,” said Lowell. “My youngest is about your age – he's in his final year at Eton. John's biggest worries are his maths. You're apparently a national hero... heady stuff for a school boy, isn't it?”

“I don't let it go to my head, if that's what you're getting at, sir...?” Harry protested.

Lowell went on, “This Voldemort chap – your man Fudge spent a year denying his... well, his return from the dead, apparently. Now MacLeish's paper is printing self-defence instructions, that other paper is starting to make a bit of sense, and Fudge spent the best part of an hour last week dancing around my enquiries. What should I make of that?”

“If you do take the Quibbler, then you know what I had to say on the matter, Mr. Lowell,” said Harry.

Lowell looked at Harry in a penetrating fashion. “If I were to ask your Mugwump – that's his title, correct? – I wonder what he'd say on all of this?”

“You'd have to ask Dumbledore himself. I'm sure it would be well thought-out,” Harry said quickly.

“Your people can mess about in a person's memories – is that right?” Lowell asked.

Harry stammered, "Er... did MacLeish bring that up... sir?"

"Is this something that's done routinely?" Lowell demanded.

Harry pulled at his collar. "I... er... you should probably be asking someone else..."

Lowell said, "Too many of the items in your papers would be noticed otherwise – dragons swooping above a beach filled with holidaymakers, for goodness' sake?"

Harry took a notable interest in his own shoes. "It's done to Muggles quite a lot, I think," he admitted. "It's part of how the magical world remains hidden."

"Three weeks ago, the Crown Office official authorised to know about you people suddenly lost all memory that magic exists," Lowell continued. "Can you explain that?"

"What are they up to?" Harry blurted out.

"You think it's your Ministry people at work, do you?" Lowell asked sternly.

"It's either the Ministry or Voldemort's people. This fellow might have stumbled across something important..." Harry considered aloud.

Lowell said tersely, "The bridge collapse in Wales – it matches up with the report of some sort of creature on the rampage... The sleeping sickness spreading in the North Country – it's the work of those Demented creatures, isn't it?"

"Dementors, sir," Harry corrected him.

"Your world is about to go to war -" Lowell began.

"It's already at war," Harry cut in. "People might not think so, but it's already started."

"MacLeish says this Voldemort of yours is a terrorist, but you're acknowledging this as a war. Your papers have begun to call you the Chosen One. They seem to think you're the one to end this mess. Do they have it right?" Lowell asked.

Harry thought a long while before he gave a single nod to the PM.

"Your world is at war, the outcome rests on a school boy, and meanwhile the leadership of this nation are expected to simply forget? I won't have the British people victimised by a foe that they can't even see! I won't have it!" Lowell snapped. "MacLeish is a newspaperman; he shades the truth without a thought. Fudge won't say whether the sky is blue. It sounds as if your Mugwump won't be of much help... Potter, are you or are you not a citizen of the United Kingdom?"

"Er... as far as I know, Mr. Lowell," said Harry. "I have a passport..."

"Are you therefore one of Her Majesty's subjects?" Lowell demanded to know.

"I suppose that I am," Harry said. "Erm... what do you want, exactly?"

"What I demand is to be kept informed by at least one of my countrymen," Lowell answered.

Harry started, "I'm not sure that I can -"

The limousine door opened and Dumbledore cheerfully moved past the black-suited men, who showed no inclination whatever to stop him. He entered as though expected and seated himself next to Harry. "I see that you have acquainted yourself with young Harry, Mr. Prime Minister?" he said.

"What the devil...?" Lowell gasped.

"You will find that an accomplished wizard is able to go more or less wherever he wishes," said Dumbledore. "However, you may be assured that I mean you no harm."



Lowell squinted at him. "Unless I'm mistaken, you're the Mugwump."

Dumbledore bowed his head. "Albus Dumbledore, at your service," he said.

"Now see here, I was speaking with Mr. Potter! I understood that he was considered an adult in your world, and allowed to keep his own counsel," protested Lowell.

"Indeed he is," Dumbledore said. "Doubtless you were hoping to round out your perspective on recent events in the wizarding world? It is what I would do in your place, especially when a young man of unimpeachable character and unique insight is made available... so much the better that he is inexperienced in the realities of politics, wouldn't you agree?"

Lowell's eyes narrowed. "What are you implying? I have every right to speak with British citizens as I please!"

"It is worth noting that not only is Mr. Potter an accomplished young man, but is also my apprentice," Dumbledore said. He turned to Harry and asked, "Now that you have taken the Prime Minister's measure, do you feel that his brief from Minister Fudge has been adequate?"

"Are you asking if Fudge is telling Mr. Lowell what he needs to know?" Harry wondered.

"Yes," Dumbledore said.

"Absolutely not, sir," Harry said without hesitation. "I'd be furious with Fudge if I were Mr. Lowell, especially over this business with the Crown Office."

Dumbledore frowned. "Pardon?"

The Prime Minister explained the likely obliviation and the Headmaster's frown deepened. "Oh, Cornelius... what are you doing...?" he said softly.

“Surely Fudge serves at Her Majesty's pleasure just as the rest of us,” Lowell said; “I'm of a mind to arrange for his sacking.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard for a time before he said in a most cautious way, “Minister Fudge is... that is to say his position is rather antiquarian in nature, Mr. Prime Minister. In the very strictest sense, Queen Margaret lacks the authority to dismiss the Minister for Magic. Minister Fudge was within his rights as we understand them to order the obliviation of this fellow at the Crown Office – the modification of his memory, in other words. In fact, he could order Her Majesty's obliviation, were her knowledge of the wizarding world deemed to have come from a source outside the Royal Family itself. We would never permit that to occur, of course.”

Lowell opened and closed his mouth silently several times, before he exclaimed, “You must be joking!”

“Alas, no,” said Dumbledore. “Although the Parliaments of Scotland and England approved the Acts of Union of 1707, the Wizengamot – our legislative and judicial assembly – did not. We had already formally separated from Muggle authority by that time, and had strenuously opposed the Union of Crowns by King James. As you can imagine, we were not enthralled by King James; he was rather interested in the persecution of supposed witches and wizards. Although we commonly refer to the British Ministry for Magic, it is, in fact, the Ministry for Magic of Scotland and England. We are obligated by law and charter to advise as necessary the highest Muggle civil authority in Scotland and England – that would be you, Mr. Prime Minister. We have as a matter of courtesy briefed the Crown Office since the early nineteenth century. However, we have never officially recognised an invested monarch of the United Kingdom, nor have we recognised the invested monarch of Scotland and England since 1688.”

Lowell closed his eyes. “1688... that's when James II was deposed...” His eyes snapped open, and he asked, “Are you saying that you magical sorts are Jacobites?”

“If you are asking whether the wizarding world accepted the ascension of Mary II and William of Orange, the answer is no, we did

not," Dumbledore returned. "As for Jacobites, I do know that at least two wizarding clans covertly supported Bonnie Prince Charlie."

Lowell laughed nervously. "So Her Majesty can't sack Fudge because you people consider the House of Stuart to be the lawful Royal House," he said. "Who is the King or Queen of England, then?"

Dumbledore replied, "The rightful King of Scotland and England is at present the Duke of Bavaria, I believe... although the Princess of Liechtenstein may now be the Queen, if the Duke has passed on. I confess that I have not kept abreast of these matters for many years."

Lowell rubbed at his forehead in agitation. "Obviously, we won't be having the Duke of Bavaria do anything whatsoever on behalf of the Crown. The people at the heart of the Scottish Problem are glorified Jacobites; they'd probably agree with you that he's the King."

"Quite so," Dumbledore agreed. "I am afraid that the unseating of Mr. Fudge remains a matter entirely in our hands. If this were to be undertaken today, I must warn you that we would face a very real and rather dangerous vacuum. For example, I could take on the position in an interim capacity, but would then have to leave the Wizengamot – a body that currently houses a number of members sympathetic to Voldemort's public agenda. If the Wizengamot were to elect a new Minister, even with my presence, it is possible that a candidate sympathetic to Voldemort could receive an interim appointment by plurality."

"So you're saying that Fudge is the least of all evils... this just gets better, eh?" Lowell sighed.

"Let me lay out my present concerns, Mr. Prime Minister," Dumbledore said. "First, you must receive necessary information. It would seem that Minister Fudge is not meeting this burden. Second, we must resume our courtesies to Her Majesty's Office. Third, we must assure that both you and Her Majesty are appropriately protected against Voldemort and his men."

“You think we're directly in danger from him, do you?” Lowell asked. “That explains why Fudge placed Shackbolt – he’s a good man, by the way.”

“I was responsible for Mr. Shackbolt’s placement through the offices of the Wizengamot; Minister Fudge showed an unwillingness to take that step, and I disagreed,” Dumbledore returned. “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister, I do believe you may be in direct danger. Voldemort was born and raised in the Muggle world – in your world. He is well aware of your leadership role and the importance of the Queen. Voldemort could walk unimpeded into your residence this evening if he so chose. It would be foolish to understate the danger, and we have an obligation to protect you accordingly. Now then, as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, I am empowered to provide you with a brief independent of the Minister. I should like to meet with you as soon as possible to address the concerns I have named.”

“I appreciate that, Mr. Dumbledore. This is an unexpected turn of events, given what I've been told about you,” Lowell admitted.

“Have you been speaking out of turn, Harry?” Dumbledore asked; his mischievous smirk gave him away.

“Neither Fudge nor MacLeish painted a flattering picture,” said Lowell.

“I imagine you are well accomplished at negotiating your responsibilities amidst a sea of manipulation, innuendo and even vendetta, Mr. Prime Minister? I fear it is a professional hazard for the both of us,” said Dumbledore.

“Indeed,” Lowell said.

“In any event, I place a good deal of faith in Harry's opinion on these matters; he is my apprentice, after all,” the Headmaster said. “I am disappointed by Minister Fudge's conduct. This will be addressed.”

“I hope so, Mr. Dumbledore. Let me be perfectly clear on this point: if this war of yours escalates, we will take action,” Lowell said. “I'll be moving to disseminate information about your world across a larger

number of people within the government. You won't be able to erase enough memories to hide away from us –”

“Please be cautious in this,” Dumbledore requested. “There are compelling reasons for the wizarding world to remain hidden.”

“That is your problem, and not mine,” Lowell said coldly. “We've already lost hundreds of British citizens to this madman, and I won't allow it to continue. A fair number of people know about your world. There are students with ordinary parents, there are these squib folk, and there are people like MacLeish. All it would take is one: a single motivated person could lead us to your Ministry, your homes, your shopping districts, or the school you lead. I suspect you've heard of the SAS and the RAF...?” Harry went pale.

“I recall the Battle of Britain and the invasion of Normandy. I know of the firestorms in Germany, and of the great bombs used in Japan. You need not remind me of the horrors that can be visited by Muggle armaments,” Dumbledore said. “Please, let us not descend into threats –”

“I don't threaten; I make decisions,” Lowell said. “I'm told that there are fewer than fifty thousand of you people in Britain. If the government of the United Kingdom is drawn fully into this war, then all of you will lose. Unless or until that happens, we will cooperate as may be appropriate. For the moment it seems that you are the only avenue, Mr. Dumbledore, but I don't like your ministerial situation – not in the slightest.”

Dumbledore said, “I wish to see the end of Voldemort and the danger he poses to all of us. We are indeed your countrymen, Mr. Prime Minister, despite Minister Fudge's view of Her Majesty's right to rule.”

“I'll be looking for deeds rather than words,” Lowell warned. “Now... how do I contact you? I imagine that odd portrait leads directly to Fudge and his staff?”

Dumbledore stopped to contemplate his options. “An owl would be rather conspicuous, wouldn't it...?” he mused.

“Erm... I could give you the number for my mobile...?” Harry suggested.

Lowell said absently, “I hope you mind the tolls better than my son; he ran up a hundred quid last month.”

“It's hard to arrange service where I live,” Harry said. “I ended up with a pay-as-you-talk price plan; it does mount up, doesn't it?”

“Indeed it does...” Lowell murmured as he withdrew a business card from within his suit coat. As he put it in Harry's hand, he began to laugh. Harry's lip twitched and he couldn't help but join in. Even Dumbledore was caught up in the absurdity of the moment, as a young wizard and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom finished the exchange of mobile numbers.

Dumbledore said nothing to Harry after they left the company of the Prime Minister; he merely patted Harry on the back. As they returned to the wizarding reception, MacLeish tried in every way imaginable to find out what Lowell had said to Harry, without actually asking. The attempt wore on Harry, and he spent the last few minutes before the meal was served in the company of Ron, Neville, Susan Bones and Serena Fawcett.

The table at the front of the hall was round and had eighteen places set. It was a few steps from a sleek podium; MacLeish took the place closest to the podium. Harry was ushered to the seat at MacLeish's right. Dumbledore was directed to the seat at MacLeish's immediate left, but he smoothly moved Covelli into his place and instead took the chair to her left.

Harry was surprised when Madam Longbottom took the seat to his right; Neville sat next to her. “Good evening, Mr. Potter,” she said. “How are you enjoying the dance thus far?”

“Er... dance?” Harry said.

“All events such as these are a dance,” she said with unexpected lightness. “I must say that it is best to simply enjoy oneself and hold to the pleasantries. It wouldn't do to dance too closely with the pretty

ones, however... that would be unseemly and quite premature. One must always remember the rules of proper courting. Ah, I see Miss Warbeck is approaching... good evening, Celestina! What a grand hat you've chosen for the occasion."

Celestina Warbeck, the well-known wizarding songstress, drew near in such exaggerated fashion that Harry struggled to keep from laughing. "Augusta darling, it's wonderful to see you gracing the head table. Isn't Keith a dear?"

"He appears to be a nice young man," Madam Longbottom said.

"Celestina... of course... it has been far too long," came a voice from behind Harry, with an undertone of pompous cheer that was all too familiar.

"Gilderoy! How smashing to see you! And your new book – it's so deep, so deliciously provocative!" Warbeck fawned.

"You've read it, have you?" Lockhart said.

"Of course not, darling – I pay people to do that sort of thing... but if Reichard says your book is deep and provocative, then surely it is!" said Warbeck.

Lockhart turned to Harry. "Ahh, Harry Potter! I see you've taken my advice to heart, and then trumped it! To completely turn your relationship with the press by purchasing a part of it... such a cunning use of resources, I must say."

"I see they've let you out. Good on you," Harry said flatly.

"I gather you've not read my book, either?" Lockhart returned. "Let me take the opportunity to thank you personally, young Harry: you saved my life that day in the chamber, literally and figuratively. I shan't forget it."

Harry was caught flat-footed. "I... uh... er... how much of your memory have you gotten back?"

“Oh, I remember everything,” Lockhart said smoothly. “It’s astonishing how clear my thoughts have become, really. I’m a new man now. I do hope you have the chance to peruse my book, Harry; I’m most curious as to your reaction.” Before Harry could say anything, he added, “I assure you, it’s nothing like my other books. My days of claiming credit for the feats of others are over. I prefer to find my own greatness.”

“Is that so...?” Harry managed. Lockhart did look like a changed man: his flamboyant robes were exchanged for a subdued tuxedo, he was still well-coiffed but less grandly so, and his smile fell within normal human proportions.

“Absolutely so,” Lockhart said. “I’ve mastered my fears and I know where my life shall lead from this point forward. It’s liberating to put aside fear, Harry; I highly recommend it.”

Harry was bewildered. “Erm... I’ll keep that in mind...?”

“Do read my book,” Lockhart said. “I provided a copy to your friend, Miss Granger. Has there ever been a more accomplished and able Muggle-born? Ahh, it appears young Mr. Weasley shall be joining us as well. I trust that Mr. MacLeish has all the brooms under lock and key?” After a pause for a bit of polite laughter from the surrounding witches and wizards, he nodded to Harry. “A pleasure, Harry Potter... I do believe I shall speak with Mr. Weasley now.”

Conversation around a table that seated eighteen was cumbersome at best. Harry spent most of the meal talking with Niall Pucey, Adrian Pucey’s father. Mr. Pucey was a wizarding barrister who represented the Wizarding Law Society of Scotland and England, and Harry made certain to congratulate him on Adrian’s appointment as Head Boy. Seated next to Mr. Pucey was Orson Montague, who represented the Magical Merchants Association. Mr. Montague threw around business terms that sounded thoroughly Muggle to Harry despite Montague’s own admission that he was a Slytherin.

Lockhart made a point of smiling at Harry every so often, and once raised his glass to Harry for no obvious reason. He did the same to



Ron once, who blanched at the sight. Harry made a mental note to ask Ron what Lockhart had said.

Eventually the pudding course was collected and conversations ebbed. MacLeish was introduced once again, and he made his way to the podium. Without prelude or notes, he began, "Thank you for joining me this evening, all of you. As the new publisher of the Daily Prophet, I take seriously the responsibility that comes with serving as this community's principal source for news and information. In these challenging times, it is more important than ever for the people to have a fair source for information, and a balanced presentation of the day's events. You have doubtless noticed changes in our format and substance, and there will be more changes to come." Murmurs arose from several places around the hall.

"Expect that we will look upon our institutions and civic life with a critical eye," he went on. "Expect that we will entertain and even shock from time to time, but that we will always inform. The Daily Prophet shall not be the voice for a favoured few; it shall no longer be a repository for folderol, and it shall not be an instrument of propaganda." Minister Fudge turned a Vernonesque shade of puce at that.

MacLeish shook his head and said, "I hear the same rumours as the rest of you. Ignore anyone who says that the Prophet is now a tool for Americans or Australians to invade British culture or to overrun British merchants. Ignore anyone who suggests that the Prophet is moving offshore, or that it shall be replaced by the Quill or the Shaman, or other such rot. I took my schooling in Britain. It should now be abundantly clear that I reside in Britain. Ladies and gentlemen, the Daily Prophet is and shall remain Britain's newspaper."

With that, the wizards and witches assembled broke into applause that continued to build until many of those assembled rose to their feet. Dumbledore clapped heartily and gave an approving nod. The only person at the head table who failed to applaud was Fudge; it appeared as though he couldn't decide whether to be angry or pleased.

MacLeish raised his hands to quiet the crowd. When everyone was once again seated, he said, "My table mates this evening are an accomplished group. First of all, I am joined by the Minister for Magic of Scotland and England, the Honourable Cornelius Fudge, and his enchanting wife Wilhemina. Thank you for gracing us with your presence this evening, Mr. and Mrs. Fudge."

MacLeish went on to introduce the rest of the people at the head table, and Harry began to puzzle out the man's reasoning. Covelli was present as Harry's advisor and guest, and her presence surely affected MacLeish as well. Obviously, the politicians were in attendance: Fudge, the Australian minister Robbins, and the American attaché Grolier. Harry placed Dumbledore in that category as well.

There were both social and business interests represented. Serena Fawcett and Neville were heirs to very old families – as was Harry, of course. Mrs. Longbottom was recognised by MacLeish in her capacity as the chair for the Daughters of the Goblin Wars. Mr. Montague and Mr. Pucey's presence was self-explanatory in Harry's mind. The Longbottoms were well known as supporters of Dumbledore. Harry knew that at least parts of the Montague family supported Voldemort. Harry had no idea where the Fawcetts or Puceys fit on that score.

The last group was made up of celebrities, Harry decided – and that apparently included Ron. There were also Celestina Warbeck, Lockhart, Gwenog Jones from the Holyhead Harpies, and Glenda Chittock from the Wizarding Wireless Network.

Harry marvelled at MacLeish's comfort with speaking before a crowd. The man knew how to raise and lower the spirits of listeners, when to speak boldly and when to fall nearly to a whisper, and how to compliment someone he clearly couldn't stand in a way that was both respectful and infuriating to the recipient. There was no magic involved, Harry was sure of it – this was art.

Conversations resumed, and Harry attempted to avoid Celestina Warbeck, evade Glenda Chittock from the WWN, and to deflect some rather odd questions from Serena Fawcett. It was something of a

relief when someone whispered in MacLeish's ear, and MacLeish announced that it was time to move outdoors for the entertainment.

The events of the weekend had been so encompassing that Harry had forgotten about Heather until they left the manor and began to descend a gentle hill that had been converted to an amphitheatre. The stage backed up to a cliff and the sea lay beyond. A broad aisle split the seating in two; wizards were led to the right and Muggles to the left. Harry was placed in the front row of the right side, in the seat closest to the aisle. Ron sat to Harry's right, Neville to Ron's right, and the others from the head table took up the rest of the row. MacLeish took the aisle seat on the left side, across from Harry.

Ron's eyes swept the stage. "How many are there in that band, do you think? Fifty? A hundred? This is going to be something, eh? Flitwick's teaching Gin to play like one of them, is that it?" he asked.

"I honestly don't know what he's teaching her," said Harry.

MacLeish rose from his seat and sauntered toward Harry. Curly Royston made his way onto the stage. Harry felt the telltale tingle of a ward being raised; the audience on the left side of the amphitheatre very clearly became distracted. MacLeish nodded at Royston, who raised his wand to his throat.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," Royston said. "I'll wager that not a few of you have ever been in a crowd this large before, eh? There are two different groups of musical performers on this stage; sometimes they'll be playing together, and sometimes separately. The small group, behind me, is a popular band... an ordinary version of the Weird Sisters, if you know them. The much larger group, to my right and your left, is called an orchestra. There are more than five dozen musicians in the orchestra, playing more than a dozen different sorts of instruments. They will be a fair bit louder than you've heard from the Wireless, unless you're like my grandchildren and run the bloody thing loud enough to split your head in two. There will also be very bright cones of light, some bright flashes of light from time to time, and perhaps even a few things that might seem like spells being cast. All of this is perfectly ordinary and should be no cause for alarm. This entire property is very heavily warded and is also secured by a

force of nearly one hundred; we do not expect any disruptions to occur. If an emergency of any sort does arise, either I or another of Mr. MacLeish's associates will come to the stage. Please enjoy the performance."

The orchestra began to tune up, and Harry nearly felt the collective gasp from behind him. It was a much bigger, bolder sound than Harry had expected – quite different than classical music heard through stereo speakers. Harry watched Kirley Duke fuss with several guitars, one after the next; he was recognized by more than a few witches and wizards despite his well-groomed appearance.

Ron leant toward Harry and said, "Sounds like they found Kirley out... wouldn't have expected Susan Bones to squeal over him."

Neville turned his head and said casually, "Don't mind hearing Susie squeal, myself..."

Ron's eyebrows shot toward his hairline. "Bloody hell, Nev! How much did you have?" he whispered forcefully.

Harry smirked at Neville. "Susie?"

"Er... just slipped out...?" Neville said sheepishly.

Mrs. Longbottom, at Neville's right, glowered at Harry and Ron and snapped, "Decorum, please!" She cuffed Neville on the back of his head and added, "You know better, young man!" Harry and Ron both straightened in their seats. Neville rolled his eyes and made a conscious effort to slouch.

After a few minutes, the lights that ringed the seats dimmed and then went out entirely. A spotlight shone on the stage and Heather appeared. She was a vision, Harry thought, in a gossamer gown that was longer than her dress on the beach but nearly as close-fitting. He heard a few nasty remarks about Heather's weight waft from the rows behind him; she was a bit fuller and curvier than the sort of women who turned up in adverts and what-not, but not in a way that should have provoked those witches. Hermione wasn't particularly slender – probably about average, based on Harry's observations – but that

didn't keep her from being beautiful in his eyes. Not even Lavender and Parvati, who were perfectly capable of serious cattiness, had ever commented on another girl's weight – at least not within his hearing. He resisted the urge to loose a few minor curses.

When the orchestra began to play and Heather began to sing, the comments stopped. She was in fine form, Harry thought. When she hit an exceptionally high note against the backdrop of the orchestra, Celestina Warbeck's monstrous hat fell to the floor; both Ron and Harry shook in their seats to keep from laughing. Harry took several opportunities to look at the first few rows of spectators. Most were transfixed; even Fudge uncrossed his arms after a time, and appeared at least noncommittal. Warbeck seemed flustered, particularly after the loss of her hat. Lockhart seemed noticeably interested in Heather, which was peculiar given that he was used to being fawned over rather than doing the fawning himself; beyond that, Harry found the man's interest both unpleasant and more than a little untoward given his age.

The performance went on for an hour and a half without interruption. There were only two truly awkward moments between the Muggles and the wizards. The first came when Kirley Duke was featured as a soloist. A good share of the wizards hooted and cheered, whilst the Muggles looked on in confusion. The second came when Heather launched into a Scottish folk song. MacLeish winced and a good share of the Muggle crowd stiffened. A number of the wizards seemed to recognize the song, however; they clapped along and cheered at the finish.

Near the end, Heather sang the song she had sung in the club, the one during which they had fallen into each other's minds. Harry resolutely closed his eyes from start to finish. When he opened them again, he saw that she had spotted him despite the lighting. Heather made her way to the front of the stage. It surely looked to the balance of the crowd that she was singing to MacLeish, but Harry knew better. She sang notes that Harry knew were impossible to sing. Ron was absolutely gobsmacked and Neville's mouth hung open. Warbeck was riveted, her hat tightly wrapped in her hands.

As the performance moved toward its conclusion, Harry could feel the power of the orchestra. It brought to mind Dumbledore's comment in St. Ebb that music was a magic of its own. He was sure that Dumbledore had said that previously as well, but couldn't remember when or where. He glanced around and knew that he wasn't the only one to feel it; even the Muggles showed signs. By the end, Harry was lost in the music. The rising to their feet of the applauding crowd brought him back to attention.

Heather gave a friendly wave to the audience, but there was something off about her – a tired emptiness in her eyes, a stiffness to her posture. Harry was immediately concerned but it occurred to him that Harry Potter didn't know Heather Magruder, not as far as either the Muggle or wizarding worlds were concerned. As much as he wanted to slip behind the stage to find out what was the matter, he knew that he could not. Kirley Duke and the other musicians in Heather's band – her 'boys', Harry remembered – came forward, obviously excited about the performance. Duke pulled her into a warm hug and then gave her a kiss that Harry thought was a bit more than a friend would give. For a moment, he felt a pang of jealousy, but only for a moment. She took a stumbling step forward as they all bowed; Duke caught her by the elbow and frowned.

The Muggles began to move out of their seating. Curly Royston made his way toward Harry, but stopped short, cast several wide-area spells and then Sonorus at his throat. He said, "You are invited to meet the orchestra conductor, principal performers and our vocalist for the evening, Miss Heather Magruder. Please keep in mind that with the exception of Mr. Duke, these people are unfamiliar with the magical world. If you feel that you cannot pass through a receiving line without asking a suspicious question or making reference to the magical world in some fashion – and that would include Mr. Duke's tenure with the Weird Sisters – please do not join the queue. On behalf of the Vox Corporation and Mr. MacLeish, I do hope that you enjoyed the performance and our evening together, and I offer our best wishes for your good health and the vitality of your magic. Good evening."

Most of those who had been introduced at the banquet joined the queue, which led to the side of the stage and toward a good-sized

tent placed to the rear. Harry found himself behind a score or more of witches and wizards, bunched together with Ron and Neville and just ahead of Madam Longbottom, Celestina Warbeck and Lockhart.

"The young lady was truly remarkable, was she not?" Lockhart said grandly.

"She did strike some notes that I would have thought beyond a Muggle," Warbeck sniffed.

"One might think you were jealous, dear friend," Madam Longbottom said.

Warbeck waved her hand dismissively. "She's a stripling of a girl – just wait until the years catch up with her range. If I were that age today, I could match her best without a thought."

"Would that be without a potion?" Lockhart said casually.

Warbeck took the posture of a Veela ready to throw fire. "I have never resorted to enhancement potions, Mr. Lockhart! That is why my repertoire has changed over the course of my career, unlike some who I will not name!"

One side of the tent had been drawn completely open. Heather and her band mates and several members of the orchestra stood in a row just inside, with MacLeish positioned at the end. She still wore her dress from the performance and Harry saw her shudder. He figured that she was cold, and would have cast a quiet warming charm if he hadn't been surrounded by other wizards. As they drew closer, he saw that her eyes were glassy, and that the movement was more of a twitch than a shudder. She appeared nervous as she clasped hands and spoke to the wizarding well-wishers.

"Look at that dress - you can almost see through it!" Ron muttered.

"Really?" Neville said; he leant forward and squinted into the tent.

"Something's not right," Harry said quietly to Ron. Just then, the witch shaking Heather's hand stiffened as if in fear and took an awkward

step back. The queue continued to move, but Heather began to receive consistently queer looks.

“She looks potted,” said Neville. “Do you think she might have taken a shot or two herself?”

“I don’t know...” Harry said as he continued to watch.

There were five wizards and three witches between Harry and Dumbledore, so Harry couldn’t quite make out what was exchanged when the Headmaster reached Heather. Covelli moved to Heather quickly, and Dumbledore moved down the line directly to MacLeish. Harry wanted to bolt the queue but kept himself in check. Despite the confusion, the queue continued to press forward.

Heather reached toward him. “Harry! It’s too much... it’s too much!” she blurted out.

“It’s too... what’s too much? I don’t understand,” Harry said.

Kirley Duke pushed past the orchestra conductor. “Heather? What’s this about? Do you need some air?” he asked.

“I don’t know... it’s just too much...” she managed.

“Miss Magruder is obviously confused, Mr. Potter,” said Covelli quickly. “She seems to know things that she shouldn’t know. Albus is fetching Keith. Mr. Duke, I’ll ask you to leave her some room, please?”

Ron moved uncertainly to Harry’s side. Neville took a deep breath and ploughed forward. He took up Heather’s hand. “Neville Longbottom,” he said; “You were magnificent, Miss.”

Heather’s eyes fluttered. She rambled, “I... ohhh... your parents... I’m so sorry, Neville, truly I am! But... no, you really are courageous, you just need to trust... never doubt who your friends are... Harry would be the best of friends if you’d simply ask it, and Ron as well... never doubt, Neville... never...”



Neville snatched back his hand. "Harry, you didn't...? How could she know...?"

Celestina Warbeck sauntered forward in her exaggerated way and presented her hand as though Heather was supposed to kiss it. Covelli moved to stand between them and said, "The young lady is exhausted. This reception is at an end."

"That's right," Kirley said firmly.

Warbeck's brow creased. "Is that so? I doubt that is your decision to make, young man." She fixed her gaze on Covelli. "And you are...?"

"I am a physician," Covelli said haughtily, "as well as a close friend of Mr. MacLeish. I must see to Miss Magruder's needs now – if you will excuse me?"

Heather looked deeply into Warbeck's eyes. "Sing what's in your heart," she said weakly. "Tell your fans to sod off – what do they know, anyway? You know you want to make a change, right? Sing what's in your heart. Always sing what's in your heart..."

Warbeck caught her hat as it fell to one side. "Er... thank you... I... you're a remarkable talent...uh... it was a privilege..." she managed.

Heather locked eyes with Lockhart. "Wha... you... how... YOU!" she spluttered.

"I'm sorry? I don't believe we've met?" Lockhart said jauntily.

"How could you... how could you do the things you've done?" Heather thundered. She pulled herself free from Covelli, shaking all the while. "HOW COULD YOU?"

Lockhart took a step forward. "Clearly something is troubling you, young lady. I merely wished to compliment you on your performance – Celestina is right to say that you are remarkable."

"HORRIBLE! HOW COULD YOU DO THOSE THINGS?" Heather railed at him. Covelli attempted to seize her by the hands but failed.

Harry readied himself to head her off. He wondered if he might have to stun her.

“Heather, that’s enough; let me take you back to the dressing rooms,” Kirley insisted.

Lockhart sighed. “I’ve done all that I can to apologise for the things that I’ve done,” he said. “Everything is out in public view now.”

Heather’s eyes bugged. “APOLOGISE? THAT COULD NEVER BE ENOUGH! WHAT YOU’VE DONE, IT’S UNFORGIVABLE!”

Kirley snapped, “Heather, that’s enough! Now, let’s go... Doctor, will you help me get her back to her room? I think she has some medicine...”

“What I’ve done to Harry... to Mr. Potter here?” Lockhart asked. “I’ve apologized personally to Harry, Miss... and how can you know of such things? It’s not possible for someone to...” His eye twitched and Harry realised that Lockhart was being drawn into Heather’s unconscious legilimency. Suddenly everything made sense, and he leapt forward so that his body came between their eyes.

“YOU MUSTN’T!” Heather shouted. “HARRY, YOU CAN’T FORGIVE HIM, NOT EVER! SOMEONE LIKE HIM WOULD NEVER REALLY APOLOGISE – HE’LL NEVER TELL THE TRUTH! HE CAN’T MEAN IT! DUMBLEDORE, WHERE ARE YOU? GET AWAY FROM HIM WHILE YOU CAN, HARRY! YOU STAY AWAY FROM HARRY – STAY AWAY!” She rushed forward and Harry wrapped his arms around her before she could claw at Lockhart.

“She... she’s mad!” Lockhart gasped.

“Someone conjure the poor girl a chair!” came a voice from one side. Three chairs appeared from thin air all at once.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake – what are you thinking?” Lockhart snapped. In a flash his wand was drawn, and everyone in the receiving line save for MacLeish and Kirley Duke went slack. Heather let out a keening

wail for a brief moment and then slumped into Harry's arms so heavily that Ron had to steady the both of them.

Kirley rushed to Heather, prised her from Harry's grasp and began to lower her to the ground. "What in the Nine Hells have you done?" he hissed at Lockhart. Covelli went to her knees and immediately began to examine Heather.

"I fulfilled the requirements of the law," Lockhart said firmly. "Conjuring chairs before a clutch of Muggles – utter foolishness!"

The crowd parted and Dumbledore and MacLeish passed through. "You performed an obliviation on someone in obvious physical distress without first finding the source of the distress, Gilderoy?" Dumbledore said. "I would not expect such incompetence from an upper form student, let alone someone who is a known expert in obliviation!"

"You could have killed her, fool!" Covelli snarled. "As it stands, she will live, but Merlin himself could not predict the extent to which she will recover!" She looked to MacLeish, and added, "She needs to be transported to St. Mungo's immediately. Arrange for it." MacLeish rushed from the tent.

"The demands of secrecy always come first, Professor Dumbledore," said Lockhart. "These are all well-known and well-travelled Muggles. As such, they would have posed a special risk to us. I stand by my actions and the Wizengamot will do the same should you press the issue – you know that. Now then, it would be best if the DMLE were to complete the rest of the obliations. I find myself rather shaken by all of this business. As for the young lady, I assume that she will in fact recover. That would be in your best interests, Mr. MacLeish, so I'm sure you'll use all of your special privileges to make it so. If not... I'm afraid that is the tragic but unavoidable cost of the security of our world."

Kirley stood up and pushed back his sleeves. "Tragic cost? She's a squib, you son of a bitch! If you'd stopped for half a second to ask...!"

Lockhart hesitated, but only for a moment. “Is that so? A squib...? Well, I suppose that explains the extent of her talent, doesn’t it? Still, did it seem as though she was capable of maintaining our secrets? I think not, and there is no exception for illnesses. It still merited –”

Kirley advanced on Lockhart but before he could reach him, something inside Harry snapped. A gust of hot wind ripped through the tent. Lockhart flew backward and blasted through the canvas, and Harry tore after him. He grabbed Lockhart by the lapels and threw him back into the tent; then he seized Lockhart’s jacket again and repeatedly slammed him into the ground. “WHY DID YOU OBLIViate HER? HOW MANY LIVES HAVE YOU RUINED ALREADY? YOU HAD NO RIGHT! WAS IT YOUR JOB? ARE YOU AN AUROR? I DON’T THINK SO! YOU MIGHT HAVE... you might have killed her... what gives you the right...?” Ron and Neville at last pulled him clear, but Kirley proceeded to take up where Harry had left off. It took a half-dozen wizards to tear the enraged guitarist loose. Once freed, Lockhart rolled over and coughed uncontrollably. It was the only sound to be heard in the tent.

Amidst the hush, Dumbledore’s quiet voice was nonetheless commanding. “This has been a most unfortunate affair,” he said. “Something clearly happened to this young woman, and it was quite obviously magical in origin. Because of Mr. Lockhart’s quick and unthinking action, not only will it be difficult to determine what has happened, but great harm may have been done. We do not obliviate when it may cause harm. The DMLE does not do so, the Aurors do not do so, and certainly a private citizen – however intentioned – should never do so.”

“That’s why we don’t mix with Muggles. MacLeish, this whole business was a mistake,” someone called out sharply.

“That is a discussion for another time,” Dumbledore said. “Mr. Lockhart has in turn suffered the results of Mr. Potter’s quick and unconsidered action. At this point, it would be for the best for all parties to let cooler heads prevail, and for the young lady to receive the healing that she requires.”

Lockhart sat up and rubbed the back of his head. He reached for his wand and collected it from the ground. Four long scratches like claw marks stretched across the otherwise soft and unblemished skin on the back of his hand; he was able to stop the bleeding with some effort, but the scratches were still raw and looked as if they would require a healer.

“You want me to absolve your apprentice, do you?” Lockhart asked as he vanished bloodstains from his skin. “I may have acted hastily, but I didn’t earn a beating. Who am I to do what I did, you ask? Who are you to attack me, Mr. Potter? Are you an Auror? Are you a member of the Wizengamot? Were you carrying out a sentence? Who are you?”

Ron squeezed more and more firmly on Harry’s wrist until Harry forced himself to say, “I was wrong. I shouldn’t have done that. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Perhaps the Hogwarts Board of Governors was right about you?” Lockhart said. “Perhaps it’s not safe for you to be at Hogwarts, even under the watchful eye of the Headmaster?”

“I’ve been no trouble at Hogwarts,” Harry said.

“No... no, you haven’t... not to-date, at least,” said Lockhart. “In any case, you would be at the mercy of the Dark Lord’s servants anywhere else. I will not be the instrument that sends you away, not for the crime of punishing me for my own ill-considered action. Consider this a repayment of my debt to you, Harry Potter. There will be no hearings, no punishment for your actions this evening – at least not by my hand. Professor Dumbledore, you have staked your reputation on Mr. Potter; I suggest you modify your approach toward him.” Lockhart struggled to his feet and extended his undamaged hand to Harry.

Though he would have rather shaken a nundu’s paw, Harry took the hand that Ron pushed forward and let Lockhart grasp it. Lockhart gave a respectful nod, and then released him. All was quiet for a moment, and then the crowd in the tent began to applaud.

“As for you, Duke,” Lockhart said, “I owe you nothing. I’ll see you before the Wizengamot – ”

MacLeish reappeared with three healers in tow. “You may have cost me five million galleons through your negligence, Lockhart,” he snapped. “That does not make me happy. Perhaps our next meeting will include a goblin adjudicator?”

Lockhart gave a hollow laugh. “That’s how it’s going to be, is it? You’re rather transparent, MacLeish. For all the airs you’ve put on this evening, I think everyone can see exactly what you really are. Very well – Mr. Duke, be sure to thank your employer for his intervention. Mr. Potter, I leave you in the hands of your master.”

The crowd hushed. Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, and then stood before Harry. “Mr. Potter, I expect better of you,” he said. “You should expect better of yourself. With the exception of such activities as may be necessary to manage the affairs of the school or your estate, you are confined to the Hogwarts grounds until the term break. Professors Detheridge and Flitwick will accompany you to Hogsmeade in the morning to collect your belongings and move them to the castle. Is that understood, apprentice?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Harry said in a small voice.

As the attentions of the crowd drifted away from Harry and toward Lockhart, Ron came forward to Dumbledore. He said in a near-whisper, “Headmaster, Heather’s mum and dad... were they with the Muggles tonight?”

Dumbledore paused for a moment before he quietly returned, “I believe they were, indeed. Mr. Weasley, would you be so kind as to fetch them on my behalf? I would rather not alert Mr. MacLeish or others to the situation, so please act quietly but with haste. I will meet you at the front of the stage in two minutes.”

MacLeish slowly walked toward Harry and Dumbledore. He stopped two paces away and folded his arms. “This didn’t turn out as I had expected,” he sighed. “I’d hoped for gains, not losses.”

"With high risks come great rewards... or great failures," Dumbledore said gravely.

MacLeish rolled his eyes. "Thank you for the wisdom, but I didn't order Chinese take-away, Dumbledore," he snorted.

Dumbledore cocked his head. "Pardon...?"

"Never mind; I'm too tired to explain it," said MacLeish. "Will you want Lucia to see Harry back to Hogwarts?"

"A Portkey will do, thank you," Dumbledore said. "Harry dislikes them rather intensely, and a journey of several hundred miles should do him a world of good." He handed Harry a copy of the evening's program. "This leaves in sixty seconds."

"Please... I want to know if Heather's all right," Harry told the Headmaster.

"Either Dr. Covelli or I will see that you are kept abreast. Good evening, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry shuffled from foot to foot as he said to MacLeish, "Look... I'm sorry that I... er..."

"What, sent my party arse-over-teakettle? You certainly did that, didn't you? Duke was no help, either," MacLeish frowned. "You're not responsible for whatever happened to Heather Magruder –"

"Yes, I am; it wouldn't have happened if it weren't for me!" hissed Harry.

"Yes, well, you're not the centre of the world, Potter – hate to be the one to break the news, but that is my job, isn't it?" MacLeish fired back. "Now, are you going to fuss like you need your nappies changed, or are you going to figure out who did this?" He glared over Harry's shoulder at Lockhart. "I think we can safely name the prime suspect, eh?"

"I haven't time to explain, but I really do think I'm partly responsible," Harry said.

"Fine, then!" MacLeish snapped. "We'll still look into it. Oh... one last thing for now: the next time you decide to lay someone out, I suggest that you finish the job. If you don't finish the job, then it's likely he'll return the favour eventually. Be seeing you." A moment later, the tent and the stage and the rolling hills of the former Black estate swirled away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry landed hard on the lawn about two hundred feet sort of the castle's main doors. Flitwick rushed out the doors to meet him. "Albus let us know you'd be on your way. Obviously something untoward has happened..."

"I'd rather not talk about it, Professor," Harry said. He brushed the grass from his tuxedo and took up a brisk walk to the doors.

"It's Filius, Harry – we're not amongst students," insisted Flitwick as he hurried to keep stride.

"Can we do this tomorrow, Professor?" Harry asked.

"Very untoward... it must have been very untoward, indeed," Flitwick said. "In any case, Albus said that you could occupy the spare bed in the sixth year Gryffindor dormitory this evening. Marcus and I will look at the vacant staff housing in the morning. Honestly, I think it's for the best that you reside in the castle, for a number of reasons."

"Yes, Professor," said Harry.

Flitwick stopped him at the doors. "If you continue in this fashion, I shall have to demand an explanation," the professor said in a tone as close to stern as he could muster.

"My apologies, Professor Flitwick; it's been a very long weekend and I wish to retire," Harry told him.



Flitwick crossed his arms and let forth a harrumph. "I see. We'll have ample time to speak of this in the morning, Harry. I trust you can find your own way to the Gryffindor entrance?"

"Good evening, Professor," Harry said, and he nearly ran across the entry hall to the stairs.

When he entered the common room, everything came to a stop. Katie Bell broke the silence. "Harry! Er... wasn't expecting to see you here... in a tuxedo... a grass-stained tuxedo... looking quite fit, though..."

Hermione, who was in her usual seat near the hearth, let her book fall into her lap. "Are you all right? Where's Ron – is he still with the Headmaster? What's happened?"

"It's wonderful to see you, as well," Harry snapped. "Ron's fine. I'm going to bed."

Dean Thomas did a double take. "To bed? Here?"

"Yes, Dean: here, in the dormitory, in the bed that all of you were keeping for me," said Harry.

"Sure, sure – we kept it for you. But why here, when you've your own place in Hogsmeade?" Dean asked.

"As of tomorrow, I won't have my own place anymore. I'm sure it'll be in all the papers," Harry returned. He stopped at the first step leading to the boys' dormitories and turned to face the common room. Everyone gaped at him; no one even blinked.

Hermione was the first to move. Her lips pursed in the way that signalled questions or unwanted advice or admonishment, and Harry wouldn't have it. His mouth moved and words came out and he couldn't stop them. "Are there any more questions? Does anyone else need to know everything about my day, what I like to eat, who I fancy, or whether I'm an attention-seeking lunatic? Oh, wait; I'm the Chosen One this week, aren't I? That's Britain, isn't it? Build someone up for the pleasure of tearing them down: that's the ticket.

Blather on about how bad things have become, and do nothing to fix them... or worse still, pretend they aren't bad at all and force everyone to agree with you. I know! You can support one side until they stumble, and then tell everyone you're for the other side – always have been, right?

"You should have seen your embarrassing bloody Minister tonight, and your bloody nobles and the famous people and all the rest... Gilderoy Lockhart was there! He was sitting there just like nothing had ever happened, and then he had the nerve to Oblivate someone without knowing the first thing about the situation! He didn't know anything – just figured it was another random Muggle, so it was perfectly fine. Cast first and ask later! Oh, she was a squib? She already knew about us? No worries, then – she was just a squib. It'll be no great loss if her brains are scrambled, anyway.

"And we're supposed to go to war against Voldemort to save this mess? Oh, yes, of course we are! We're Brits, stiff upper lip and all. Rule Britannia, right? Rule Britannia... it should be Rue Britannia! Rue Britannia; Britannia, rue the day! Oi, Rue effin' Britannia!" He stopped, heaving for air.

Seamus Finnigan broke the silence. "Um... we just wanted to know if you were all right, mate," he said nervously.

Hermione stood. "Harry... the obliviation... was it your friend...?"

Harry's voice cracked as he said, "Not tonight, I... I can't talk about this tonight." He rushed up the first few stairs and out of sight.

Dennis Creevey's voice wafted up the stairs from behind him. "Is it going to be like last year again?"

"Let's just hope for the best," Harry heard Katie Bell say.

"Should we keep our fingers crossed?" someone asked.

Harry stopped halfway up the stairs and breathed raggedly. "Great... just smashing," he muttered under his breath. "I proved myself crazy twice in one night." It was an effort to reach the sixth year boys' room.

He closed the door firmly behind him and tumbled onto his old bed without prelude. He didn't expect a good night's sleep, and his expectations were met.

## Chapter Thirty-nine

### THE OLD-OLD CROWD

September 22, 1996

"Not a bad day for a stroll," Detheridge said.

"Yes, September is pleasant enough," Flitwick agreed. "Don't be fooled; winter will set in soon enough."

"What do you think, Harry?" asked Detheridge.

"Dunno... I suppose it's nice," Harry said flatly.

Detheridge was quiet for a while before he said, "The countryside in these parts reminds me of where I grew up."

"Wherever were you brought up, Marcus?" Flitwick asked. "I've often wondered about your accent. Of the Yanks I've known, I've never heard its like."

Detheridge took on a wistful look. "Born and raised in Maine," he said. "Haven't been there in near to thirty years, but I suppose it took."

"Maine... I'm not familiar with Maine. What sort of city is it?" Flitwick wondered.

"I don't think it's a city, Professor Flitwick," Harry said.

"Maine's a state," Detheridge explained; "Think of... I don't know... Surrey? Cornwall?"

Flitwick squinted at Harry. "I have reminded you repeatedly that my name is Filius," he chided.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

Detheridge snapped, "That's enough foolishness, Mr. Potter. This is on account of something you did, not Flitwick here. You put Albus in a terrible position – what did you expect would come from it?"

Flitwick crooked an eyebrow. "You managed to coax the events from Harry, did you? I couldn't get him to speak of it last night."

"We haven't spoken of anything," Harry said. "The papers hadn't come yet at breakfast, and the old man wasn't at the head table, was he?"

"I'm Professor Flitwick to you, but the Headmaster is now the 'old man'?" Flitwick tut-tutted.

"How would you know the first thing about last night?" Harry demanded of Detheridge.

Detheridge stopped walking for a moment, and then shrugged. "Word gets around quickly. I do live in Hogsmeade, after all," he said.

Harry wasn't satisfied, but he let it go. All he wanted to accomplish was to get in and out of Madam Rosmerta's garret as quickly as possible. It was bad enough that he was to be confined to Hogwarts; he didn't care to parade the fact before the entire village.

As soon as they entered the Three Broomsticks, Madam Rosmerta put aside her work and came straight away. "Oh, Harry!" she said. "Is this true? Are these real photographs?" She held up a copy of the morning's Daily Prophet. The headline blared:

**POTTER POPS LOCKHART:**

**Master Obliviator Spells Squib, Bloody Harry Makes Him Pay**

There were two photos displayed beneath: the first showed Harry slamming Lockhart to the ground over and over again, and the second was of a contrite-looking Harry being dressed down by Dumbledore.

"Erm... photos don't lie, I suppose..." Harry mumbled.

“Good heavens!” Flitwick squeaked at the sight.

“Good on you, then!” said Rosmerta. “That louse went a full year without settling his account. After they sent him to St. Mungo’s, I went to Gringotts for it. The trustee told me there was nothing left – not even his salary from Hogwarts! Can you imagine it – with all the books that man must have sold?”

“I must say that I’m not surprised,” Flitwick said. “Gilderoy was never a terribly responsible sort. For the life of me, I still don’t understand why Albus hired the man in the first place. I realize the Defence post has been hard to fill for many years... oh, no offence to you was intended, Marcus!”

“None taken; I knew the position was cursed when I accepted it,” Detheridge admitted.

Flitwick gasped, “Then why on Earth...?”

“I needed to be here,” said Detheridge. “Besides, the only one who’s actually died is the fellow Albus brought in five years back – Quirk, or something – and that wasn’t from the curse. The Crouch boy doesn’t really count, to my mind.”

Flitwick pondered that for a moment. “There have been deaths after the fact; you can’t say with certainty that they weren’t curse-related,” he returned.

“I can, actually,” Detheridge assured him.

Rosmerta waved the paper to seize their attention. “Harry, do you want me to speak with that old goat? I know a thing or two about Albus, and trust me when I say that I can change his mind on this. Confining you to Hogwarts – honestly!”

Harry shook his head. “It’s not worth the bother, but thank you. It means a lot to me that you’d, you know... stand up for me like that.”

"If you're certain...? Well, you can count on me, and not just on account of your mum and dad. Ted Tonks paid on the garret for the entire year and I'll be holding it for you. I'm still having words with that Headmaster of yours the next time he darkens my door... locking you away in the castle over this... all that alchemy must have addled his brain," Rosmerta huffed. "I suppose you're here for your things?"

"I'm afraid he is, Madam," Flitwick said.

Rosmerta narrowed her eyes at Detheridge. "I see you're part of this, Marcus?" she said dangerously.

Detheridge held up his hands and said, "I'm just a pack horse; Harry's apprenticed to Dumbledore, not to me. If it were my choice, I'd just hex the boy to within an inch of his life and be done with it."

"Thanks a lot for that," Harry said sourly.

Flitwick drew a pocket watch from his robe. "I do have to lecture at ten o'clock, Harry. If we could..."

"Yes, yes, off with you," harrumphed Rosmerta. "I'll have scones for you when you leave, Harry, and there are always more where those come from." She muttered on as she went back to the bar. "Confined... not a brain in the man's head sometimes... I should set Aberforth on him; that would fix the pillock... I hope that phoenix singes his beard... the poor boy's been through enough..."

Harry couldn't help but smile as he climbed the stairs. Even though it had only been three weeks, he had begun to feel something of an attachment to the garret. Madam Rosmerta had gone out of her way to make him feel at home, he thought. Sometimes Rosmerta reminded him of Mrs. Weasley; he wondered if she had children of her own. He reached the top of the stairs, then took a step backward and quickly drew his wand.

Detheridge moved beside him and silently mouthed, "What's wrong?"

Harry mouthed back, "My wards have been down."

Detheridge palmed his wand and cast two spells. "They're up now," he whispered.

Harry shook his head. "They aren't mine," he returned.

Detheridge looked to Flitwick, who drew his wand as well. He moved to one side of the door and Flitwick to the other. Flitwick motioned to Harry to stay back, and then counted off 1-2-3 with the fingers on his free hand. At three, the door vanished. Detheridge cast three quick spells – one of which Harry thought was a shield – and then dashed briefly into the open doorway. He laid down a series of stunners and then cleared off.

"Come in, gentlemen," came Dumbledore's voice from within. "I've been expecting you, but I had not expected to be met with a fusillade of stunning spells. Well done, Marcus... Filius... and well spotted, Harry."

Harry's grip on his wand tightened, even as he struggled to keep a grip on his anger. "You broke my wards! This is my flat, whether I'm going to be living in it or not! You can't just walk through my door any time you like! There... there must be rules about that!"

"Indeed there would be, Harry, had I at all intended to enter your residence. You see, I used to live in this garret many years ago. This area was given over to general storage at the time, and my room was located where the washroom now lies. I apparated here with the intention of arriving in the unused space, and in doing so I'm afraid that I collapsed your wards. May I ask how you knew that the replacement wards were not your own?" asked Dumbledore.

"They didn't feel like mine," Harry snapped. "Now what are you doing here?"

"It was my intention to speak with you in a place free of unwanted ears – more properly, to speak with you and our two colleagues," Dumbledore said. "I had no intention of invading your private space, nor will I do so once you have returned to the castle. Alas, this is yet another example of how things are not always what they seem, nor do they always turn out as intended." He looked to the side of the



room and put on a small smile. "I would ask that we sit but you've quite thoroughly destroyed the sofa, Harry. Nothing I have attempted has had any lasting effect."

Flitwick walked to the pile of sofa bits and sifted through them. "Is this the work of the apothecary spells I gave to you?" he asked.

"I think I twiddled them," Harry admitted. "I won't be distracted, though. What do you want, Dumbledore? You could have just summoned me to your office."

"As I said, I wished to speak with you in a place with no unwanted ears. Regrettably, that cannot always be said of my office," said Dumbledore. He gave his wand a negligent flick and four squashy armchairs appeared in a circle. With another flick came a table in the centre of the circle, topped by four cups and a steaming pot of tea. "Do you take sugar, Harry?" he asked.

"None for me, thank you," Harry said sullenly.

"Two sugars please, Albus," said Flitwick.

"If the world was ending, you Brits would stop for a spot of tea," Detheridge sighed; "You know I can't abide by it." He waved his wand sharply and a paper cup of coffee appeared in his free hand.

"Get on with it, then," huffed Harry.

"Why did I limit your movements, Harry? Can you explain my actions?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry goggled for a moment before he fired back, "Why should I have to explain your actions to you? That's all wet, isn't it?"

"Humour me, apprentice," Dumbledore said.

"I put you in a terrible position," Harry sullenly returned.

"I would rather hear an explanation in your own words," Dumbledore chided him.

"It's the truth, isn't it? Lockhart obliterated Heather, I laid him out, and you punished me for it. You did what you had to do," said Harry.

"That is a partial truth," Dumbledore countered. "You left out an important step in the sequence of events."

"I don't follow," Harry said.

"What happened immediately after you 'laid out' Gilderoy, as you put it?" asked Dumbledore.

"Well... Lockhart got up from the ground, and he..." Harry stopped and thought for a moment. "He turned the whole thing around, didn't he? How'd he manage that?"

"That is an excellent question," Dumbledore said. "I am not certain of the answer myself. Gilderoy has always been possessed of a smooth tongue, but I do not recall him responding smoothly to difficult situations."

Harry thought of Lockhart's recurring cowardice during his year as a professor, and nodded in agreement. "So you had to head him off, then?" he advanced.

"Well put," said Dumbledore. "That was made all the more important by those present. Many of the dignitaries in attendance were within sight of the events, and they recognized what Gilderoy had done to Miss Magruder. However, a number of very important wizards missed the first events and only observed Mr. Lockhart's abrupt journey through the side of the tent."

"Through the side of the tent, you say?" Flitwick squeaked. "What in heaven's name did you do, Harry?"

"I got angry," Harry said.

Detheridge snorted, "That explains it."

“Quite so,” said Dumbledore. “In any event... unlike your former professor, Harry, I am quite capable of responding to difficult situations. Improvisation is a skill of mine and one in which I’m rather proficient, if I might be so bold. What conditions did I place upon your movement?”

“You confined me to the grounds, which is why we’re here,” Harry grumbled.

“It was already your intention to relocate to the castle, was it not... or was young Mr. Weasley incorrect?” Dumbledore asked.

“He was trying to push me into it, yeah, and I think Hermione wanted me to agree to it,” admitted Harry.

“Hence my choice was inconsequential,” Dumbledore declared.

“You didn’t just make me move back to the castle, you confined me there,” argued Harry.

Dumbledore stroked his beard and asked, “Was that without exception?”

“There was something about tending to my estate, wasn’t there?” Harry acknowledged.

“I allowed that you could leave when it was necessary to manage the affairs of your estate,” clarified Dumbledore. “Obviously, you must also attend to your duties as my apprentice. Recount for me, if you would, the instances when you have left the Hogwarts grounds since the beginning of term?”

“Other than coming back and forth to Hogsmeade? Well... there was the Goblin Hunt...” Harry began.

“That fell within your responsibilities as an apprentice. Since I was uninvited, it was necessary for you to attend in my stead,” said Dumbledore.

“I went to talk with Arthur Weasley once... and I went to see Heather at my beach...” Harry added.

“Both journeys were to a property of your estate,” Dumbledore affirmed. “It is necessary to provide upkeep and oversight for one’s properties. It would be shameful to allow further decay or decline – an affront to your two families, surely.”

“What if I need to go to Diagon Alley?” Harry asked.

“You will certainly have to meet your trust manager from time to time – Fliptrask, is it?” Dumbledore returned. “There is also the matter of the Weasley twins’ establishment, of which you are a part owner. Between the two, I would imagine that at least three journeys are justifiable between now and the holidays.”

“Hogsmeade?” Harry continued.

“You are expected to arrange regular meetings with your conservators, and we can’t expect Remus or Madam Bones to conduct your business here in the castle. That would set a grievous precedent, given the number of heirs presumptive in attendance,” Dumbledore said. “No, no, I would expect you to take those meetings here. I imagine Madam Rosmerta would be accommodating in that respect. You will also need to meet Mr. Tonks on occasion. I am certain that Professor Tonks would be happy to escort you.”

“Er... MacLeish’s castle?” Harry went on.

“Business of the estate, given that you share joint ownership in the Daily Prophet,” Dumbledore said easily.

“The Ministry?”

“If you are summoned there, you would surely have to comply.”

“Uh... Edinburgh?”

“Potions supplies, of course – I can’t be expected to arrange for those, and that seems suitable work for an apprentice.”

“What about Monte Carlo?” Detheridge smirked. “Surely you can’t keep him from there, or Ibiza... or how about New York? New York’s nice this time of year.”

“There are Confederation meetings in New York from time to time,” Dumbledore said with a casual air. “Monte Carlo... perhaps you intend to set Harry an assignment in the calculation of probabilities?” Flitwick broke into peals of laughter.

“You didn’t cover Ibiza, though,” said Detheridge.

Dumbledore’s lips quivered. “It has been known to be a nesting ground for the white phoenix,” he said, “although I suspect young Harry’s head might be turned by entirely different sorts of birds?”

Detheridge began to laugh. “How can you do that with a straight face?” he managed.

“Decades of practice, Marcus,” Dumbledore said serenely.

Harry shook his head. “So you gave me a meaningless punishment to make it look good?” he asked.

“It is not entirely meaningless. I imagine you will find ever increasing demands on your person simply by being present within the castle. I have a few activities in mind, as it happens,” Dumbledore said. He clapped his hands and continued, “Firstly, I believe you would benefit from occasional attendance at N.E.W.T. level lectures, if invited by the staff. Secondly, you will travel to Hogsmeade on the third Saturday of October in my company. Some former associates of mine will be visiting. You must meet them, Harry – it is imperative.”

“All right...” Harry said, with not a little apprehension.

“Well, that wasn’t at all cryptic, was it?” mocked Detheridge.

“The both of you will be in attendance,” Dumbledore said to Detheridge and Flitwick. “This will simply be a gathering of old friends,

who are seeking to make new friends. No one is to make more of it than that. Do we understand one another?"

Detheridge said, "Clear as crystal."

Flitwick nodded in agreement but said, "May I ask a question, Albus?"

"You may always ask," Dumbledore allowed.

"Will any of my former apprentices be in attendance?" Flitwick asked.

"I am expecting Oscar Pomfrey to join us," said Dumbledore.

Flitwick appeared lost in thought and the four men sat quietly for a few moments. "This may prove a dangerous game," he said at last.

Dumbledore steepled his fingers and said, "It is a game that you are not required to play."

Flitwick scowled, which was an expression Harry had never seen on the professor's face. "Of course I'm required!" Flitwick said dangerously. "At any rate, this will not be a repeat of the last war; with Rinalda gone, there is nothing left to stay my hand. I will stand with you and whoever else is willing to stand with us. This is a matter of honour."

"Of course," said Dumbledore.

"Do not take me lightly; you know better than that," Flitwick warned.

"It has been a long time – longer for you than for me," Dumbledore offered.

Flitwick rose from his chair and stood defiantly. Despite his height, he suddenly seemed quite imposing. "Harry has been helping me to burn off the dross. You will find my skills more than adequate," he said with steel in his voice.

Dumbledore raised his hands in defence. "I do not doubt it, my friend," he said. "If, however, you require a practice duel to raise your spirits, then I will be happy to oblige you."

The corners of Flitwick's mouth rose. "You wouldn't last beyond seven minutes against me," he said.

"Ah, then some of the dross remains! In your best days, it took you no more than four minutes to best me," Dumbledore laughed.

"That's true, but I'm not the only one of us who should be in his dotage," Flitwick returned.

"I'm still waiting for you to give me a proper duel," Detheridge said to Flitwick.

"We shan't duel, my good man," Flitwick said; "Duelling isn't your style; we would be more suited to a contest."

Detheridge broke out in a big smile. "Don't tease me, Flitwick," he said.

Dumbledore lit up. "Contests would be smashing!" he said. "In a few weeks, we may have an ample supply of participants. It would do the students a world of good to observe the efforts of experienced wizards, would it not?"

"By 'experienced', do you mean 'old', Albus?" Flitwick said merrily.

"One does suggest the other," said Dumbledore. He rose from his seat and then vanished it. "Would you care for some assistance with packing, Harry, or would you rather we await you downstairs?"

Harry considered it and then tried to keep a grin from forming. "Why don't you wait downstairs, Headmaster? I'm sure Madam Rosmerta would love to catch up," he said innocently.

"Oh, dear..." Flitwick said under his breath.

“A capital idea, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “I wouldn’t mind one of her delicious scones, as I missed breakfast this morning.”

Detheridge was last out the door and onto the stairs. He turned back to Harry and said, “Lucia will invite you to sit in on History of Magic in a few days’ time. Take her up on it.”

“She told you that?” Harry asked.

“It was mentioned at some point,” said Detheridge. “By the way... that was a nasty trick you just pulled on Albus.”

Harry shrugged and Detheridge laughed. “No need to hurry along, mind you,” Detheridge said, “but I’m heading down... yeah, she’s winding up now. This should be fun to watch.”

Harry took a deep breath and looked around the living room. It dawned on him that there was actually very little to pack. He summoned a few things to the bedroom and began to load his trunk. He bundled a Quidditch shirt around the photo of Hermione to protect it from the rest of the contents. Then he sat on the end of the bed and just breathed. He waited a quarter of an hour – to allow the dust to settle downstairs – before he floated his trunk to the stairs, locked the door and re-cast his own wards.

\* \* \* \* \*

October 1, 1996

The History of Magic classroom was utterly transformed from the days of Professor Binns. Harry had never thought about it before, but he wondered why the room had been shot through with cobwebs during Binns’ days. It was possible, he supposed, that the house elves had been warned off; more likely, they hadn’t been able to stay awake in the room any more than the students had.

Covelli had imbued the room with her style. It was light and airy; the walls were adorned with still paintings of various styles; and even the windows had changed shape. Hermione whispered something about ‘Italianate’, he thought; it slipped his mind as Covelli entered and the



room quieted. Books were open, parchments were out, and ink bottles were uncorked. Another difference was that the sixth and seventh year NEWT classes had been combined, owing to the sharp difference in course content from the previous year. In nearly every way, it was utterly unlike any History session that Harry had ever attended.

"We are joined today by my fellow apprentice, Mr. Potter. Thank you for coming; I hope you find this hour enlightening," said Covelli. "That applies to all of you, of course." She waved her hand absently and a large chalkboard appeared. She tapped a piece of chalk twice with her wand, and it rose into place against the slate.

She cleared her throat and began, "Today's topic is Goblin Rebellions." There were several audible hisses, at least two gagging sounds, and more than one inkpot was tipped. Harry's stomach roiled.

Covelli let out a great snort. "I cannot believe that you fell for such a silly joke on my part," she laughed. "If I choose to speak of goblins again in this class, it will be of today's goblins and not of the rebellions. In fact... I will now summarize for you the totality of lessons learned from the various goblin rebellions. Quills, please?"

She snapped her fingers, and the chalk moved to write as she spoke. "Number one: The goblins did not lose rebellions due to the magical superiority of wizards. Number two: The goblins did not lose rebellions due to the numerical superiority of wizards. Number three: The goblins lost rebellions due to disagreements and – on occasion – battles between their own factions. Number four: Each time the goblins lost a rebellion, they nonetheless won something of value from the wizarding community. E così finisce." By the time Covelli looked up, not only had Hermione's hand flown into the air, but also the hands of Mandy Brocklehurst, Anthony Goldstein, Susan Bones, Ron, and even Malfoy.

"Meh... let us move on to something of more consequence," she said with a flippant air. With a clap of her hands, the slate was cleared; a rumble of murmuring began as people tried to finish their notes with the help of neighbours. Covelli paid the rumbling no mind as she strode toward the magical projector at the centre of the room.

Harry nudged Hermione. "Do her slides look different to you?" he whispered.

Hermione said without looking away from her parchment, "Slides...? Oh, do you mean her projections? They're not exactly slides, of course; some of them are actually extracts from –"

"I asked if they look different than the ones the other professors use – you know, the size and shape?" Harry said.

Hermione set down her quill and squinted toward Covelli. "They're a bit blockier, aren't they? I hadn't noticed."

Ron turned around and whispered, "Hers are in blue cases; everyone else's are clear. Her stuff seems a lot newer, as well; that's not saying much next to Binns, 'course..."

Hermione chewed at her lip. "Hadn't noticed that either..." she muttered.

This time, the chalk scratched against the board before Covelli began to speak. "Today's topic is 'Major European Wizarding Conflicts of the Last Two Hundred Years'... yes, Mr. Goyle?"

"Bloody hell, Goyle raised his hand?" Harry hissed. Hermione grasped Harry's hand to quiet him.

"Er, is that summat we're supposed to be talking of, Professor Doctor?" Goyle asked.

Covelli gave a thin smile. "'Doctor' will do nice, Mr. Goyle. What do you mean by your question? I do not understand."

"It's just... seems like old Ghostie only talked 'bout really old stuff," Goyle said slowly as two seventh-year Slytherins snickered. "Seems to me that's because old Ghostie knew what were on the NEWT exams, mum... and if the newer history weren't on the exams, then it seems to me the Ministry don't want it there."

The room grew very silent, so silent that Harry heard Ron's stomach gurgle. Covelli cleared her throat, a sound which echoed across the room. "That's 'Professor Ghostie', Mr. Goyle. Five points to Slytherin on your behalf, however, as that was an astute observation."

Malfoy raised his hand amidst the chuckling. When called upon, he demanded, "What would lead you to think that the Ministry for Magic is hiding our own history from us? That's a rather treasonous idea, isn't it, Doctor?"

"Only if I am making an unfounded accusation, boy," Covelli returned. "I am happy to continue that discussion outside the confines of this class. Now then..."

Ron carefully leant back toward Harry. "Malfoy's shilling for the Ministry?" he whispered.

As Covelli loaded the projector, Lavender Brown - who was seated beside Ron - turned and said, "He's probably living on a trust allowance, and that means the Ministry's probably in control of his Galleons."

Hermione muttered, "Good point, Lavender..." and then bit down on her quill so hard that a small piece came loose.

The projector came to life with a pop, and the head of a wizard appeared above Covelli's desk. It slowly spun in a circle. The wizard had long, aristocratic features and foppish hair. "This," said Covelli, "is the only known image of a wizard called Racine. It was crafted from a pensieve image taken from one of his victims who happened to survive. I assure you that this did not happen often."

"He doesn't look like much," Adrian Pucey said.

"Looks can deceive, Mr. Pucey, though at first glance I would not disagree," said Covelli. "Racine was responsible for the deaths of at least a thousand witches and wizards over a ten year period, and ten times that many non-magical people."

"Bloody hell," someone forcefully whispered.

"It was certainly bloody, and surely it was hell for some," Covelli agreed. "Racine was an alchemist - of that, history is certain. His true identity was never revealed. It is believed that he was pursuing a new form of alchemy, but that the results were rather ruthlessly suppressed upon his defeat. He was brought down in 1815 by this man -" She changed the projection to reveal the head of an unremarkable wizard somewhere in his middle years. "Nicolas Flamel," she finished.

Terry Boot raised his hand. "I had understood that Flamel was purely a scholar, Doctor," he said.

"One cannot live for hundreds of years without a rather... varied existence," Covelli countered. "A case in point, Mr. Boot: the Headmaster has been a scholar and educator for much of his life, yet he led the group who vanquished the Dark Lord Grindelwald."

Tony Goldstein's hand shot up. "Headmaster Dumbledore led a group against...? What group, Doctor? I've not seen any references to a group -"

Covelli waved him off. "We will come to that," she said with visible discomfort. "Shall I continue?" The entire class sat forward in their seats. Harry had to admit that Covelli was drawing him in, which was something he'd never expected from a history class.

"Master Flamel had a team of his own," Covelli continued. She changed the projection again. Racine's head moved far to the left and Flamel's to the right, where it was joined by four more. The first new head briefly glowed. "This was Takeda Yatsusana, one of Master Flamel's three apprentices at the time. Master Yatsusana was apprenticed to Flamel by his father, who was a leader in the Japanese magical community and the first Japanese representative to the ICW."

The second head then glowed. "This was Boris Karensky, the second of Master Flamel's apprentices in those days. Master Karensky was one of the greatest of Flamel's alchemical apprentices. Those of you in NEWT Potions will work from some of his postulates."

The third head took its place. The wizard was still a young man in the image that floated over Covelli's desk, but Harry had no doubt about his identity. "This is Alexandre de Maupassant, the third of Master Flamel's apprentices," Covelli said. "De Maupassant has been an alchemist, duellist, gourmand, and a lover of women – absurdly so... and in my informed opinion, he is... ehh... the 'right pain in the arse'."

Hermione appeared scandalized but resigned – Harry figured she'd spent enough time around Covelli to expect such a remark – even as Ron attempted to stuff his fist into his own mouth to hold back the laughter. Harry discovered that Hannah Abbott snorted when she laughed, and that Terry Boot hiccupped. For his part, Malfoy was rubbing at his temples and forcibly looking downward so that no one would see him smile. Harry was half-tempted to launch a mild stinging hex so Malfoy would raise his head, but thought better of it.

When the class returned to a semblance of order, Covelli motioned to the floating images. "You may now ask your questions," she declared.

Goyle raised his hand once again, and the class went deadly silent; Malfoy appeared thunderstruck. "You say that the Marquis is a right pain in th' arse – beggin' your pardon, mum – like the bloke's still kicking," he said; "Blimey, but he'd be an old bugger, eh?"

"Two more points to Slytherin, Mr. Goyle, but do know that Mr. de Maupassant's title is spoken as 'mar-KEY', not 'MAR-kwiz'," Covelli said kindly. "I did indeed use the present tense. The Marquis remains alive to this day... despite his best efforts from time to time. He is rather like a woman when asked his true age..." This time the laughter started with Lavender Brown, and soon the room was filled with snorting and hiccupping and braying and coughing.

Harry saw that Goyle was tapping the fingers of one hand with the other, as though he was counting. Above the din, Goyle said quietly, "Right, had to be an old enough bloke to fight... was with Old Man Flamel 'round 1800..."; then he nudged Pucey and whispered, "The bugger must be 'round about two hundred and thirty." With that, he tapped Pucey's arm and half-raised his own before pulling it down quickly.

Harry leant close to Hermione's ear and asked, "What's going on with Goyle?"

"He worked out how old the Marquis is, didn't he?" Hermione whispered.

"Looked like it to me. Is he giving it over to Pucey?" wondered Harry.

"Goyle's been different this year," Hermione allowed. "You haven't seen it, of course, because you've not been around the classes. It almost seems as if he's studying... perhaps he really is?" Pucey shook his head firmly at Goyle, who sighed and slid his hands beneath his bottom as though he wanted to keep them from rising. Hermione turned to Harry with her eyebrows raised; he gave a small shrug in return.

"Mr. Goyle, you have something else to add?" Covelli asked abruptly.

"Erm... no, mum... uh... Professor... er, Doctor... nothing to add," Goyle said roughly.

"Our man Greg was just saying that the Marquis must be in the neighbourhood of two hundred and thirty years old," Pucey piped up. Goyle turned an unattractive shade of purple at that.

"You are not required to answer my questions unless I say it is so," Covelli said to Goyle. "I admit that I am curious how you came to that number, however."

Pucey slapped Goyle on the shoulder. "Out with it, Greg. You're not a muppet, and Malfoy shan't be treating you as one," he said.

Malfoy threw his quill against his desk and it clattered into the next row, close to Pucey and Goyle and three seats behind Harry. "Enough, Pucey – I get it!" he snapped.

"Mr. Malfoy! Collect your quill immediately!" Covelli demanded.

As he passed, Malfoy hissed at Pucey, "Bloody upstart... your family was nothing when mine was already fully ascended... probably grubbing in the mud, weren't they...?"

Pucey began to rise from his seat but Goyle caught him by the sleeve. "Draco aren't worth it... got a big mouth and a little wand," Goyle said in full voice.

"You will pay me the respect I'm due!" Malfoy shouted at Goyle.

"MR. MALFOY!" Covelli shouted in return. Pucey looked to Harry and mouthed 'take points'. Harry's brow beetled, and Pucey repeated the same phrase.

"Twenty points from Slytherin and detention with Mr. Filch, Mr. Malfoy," Harry said calmly. "That's a sight better than Dr. Covelli has in mind, I'll wager, and a sight better than you deserve. I won't make you apologize to Mr. Pucey because I doubt you'll mean it." He quickly turned to Covelli and added, "I apologise for stepping in, ma'am, but I'd really rather hear the rest of your lecture than listen to this twaddle."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter, and I thank you for the bit of flattery as well," Covelli said. "Mr. Goyle, I shall have to take two points for your comments regarding Mr. Malfoy, without consideration for their accuracy." Her expression was even, almost empty. Harry recognized it for what it was: the blankness of intense Occlumency. He was sure she had been thinking of something more permanent than the removal of points, at least for a moment. She took a long breath and added, "Five points to your choice of house, Mr. Potter...?"

Harry thought for a moment, and then said, "Slytherin, please – on behalf of Mr. Goyle." Ron turned to Harry, dumbstruck.

Covelli cracked a small smile. "I would have made a similar choice. Mr. Malfoy, you will collect your things and leave my presence – now. You will report to Mr. Filch this evening. It is fortunate for you that Slytherin is without a Head of House." She crossed her arms and waited until Malfoy left the room with a loud slam of the heavy doors.

“Now then, Mr. Goyle, would you care to explain why you believe the Marquis de Maupassant is two hundred and thirty years old?” Covelli asked.

Goyle tugged at his collar as though it had suddenly gone tight. “Well... er... it’s like this... the bloke was with Old Man Flamel, see? You say they offed this Racine in eighteen hun’red an’ fifteen, and that Racine was offin’ wizards for ten years... that puts it to eighteen hun’red an’ five. He was out of his regular schooling, eh?” Pucey grinned at him.

“That would explain an estimate of two hundred and five years, roughly,” said Covelli. “Why did you add twenty-five years, Mr. Goyle?”

Goyle cleared his throat; it was a rough sound. “Flamel, he were an alchemist, and an apprentice would be twenty-seven at the least, mum.”

Covelli couldn’t keep the surprise off of her face. “Ten years beyond essential schooling was the apprenticing standard prior to ICW standardization, Mr. Goyle... well done. This takes us to... two hundred and fifteen. The additional fifteen years, if you please?”

“Marquis is a royal thing... wit’ a name like his, I figure on the Muggle Frenchies. There ain’t no French royals, mum, not since seventeen hun’red an’ ninety or thereabouts,” Goyle said. “I figure he did his proper schooling before that, so he’s from seventeen hun’red an’ seventy... maybe before that, so I put in another ten years...”

“Oh, very well done, Mr. Goyle!” Covelli said with a happiness Harry had rarely heard in her voice. “Application to one’s studies does wonders, yes? Remain diligent, if you please?”

“Good show, Greg,” Harry heard Pucey whisper.

“Haven’t brought in this many points since... since never,” Goyle muttered in return.



“Before we move onward,” Covelli said, “it is important to name the fourth man whose head adorns our room. Does anyone happen to recognize this man? I do not expect it would be so. Anyone?”

After a few moments of silence, Covelli said, “This is the fourth member of Master Flamel’s team, Jean de Flandres. Mr. de Flandres was the non-magical fourth son of a renowned French wizarding family – you’ll not find a witch or wizard in France who will speak of which family it may have been. He was a soldier who supported the French revolutionaries prior to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte – who became the non-magical Emperor of France for a time – and was in hiding when he crossed paths with Master Flamel.

“It was Mr. de Flandres who made the initial connection between Racine’s victims and then correctly pointed Flamel and his apprentices. Master Flamel noted in documents of the time that Mr. de Flanders personally saved his life on at least three occasions between 1807 and 1815. He arranged for Mr. de Flanders to meet a young witch from Belgium, to whom he was eventually married. Their third son, August de Flanders, rose to serve as the Belgian Minister for Magic before falling victim to one of Grindelwald’s attacks in the 1930s. His descendants are an accomplished group, and continue to play a major role in European wizarding life.” The only sound in the room for more than a minute was the scraping of quills on parchment. It wasn’t lost on Harry that he had learned more wizarding history in the course of half an hour than he could recall from the five previous years. He wondered how the blood purists in the room felt about the idea that a Squib had saved the life of the world’s greatest alchemist not once, but three times.

“And now we move to Trampuso,” Covelli pressed on.

“Trampuso?” Ron whispered.

“He was a Spanish dark wizard,” Hermione told him quietly.

“Miss Granger, I prefer that you share with the class as a whole,” Covelli said. “Who was Trampuso, if you please?”

“Antoni Serra Tramposo was a Spanish dark wizard whose rise began in 1877,” Hermione said quickly, almost reflexively. “He was defeated by the Marquis de Maupassant in 1886.”

“Two points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger, but Tramposo was not precisely a Spaniard,” corrected Covelli.

“Tramposo was Catalanian, of course; he came from Puigcerda. With a difference of a few miles, he could have been a Frenchman,” Daphne Greengrass tossed off casually. She finished with a wink at Hermione and a chilling glare at Covelli.

“Two points to Slytherin, Miss Greengrass... and one taken for failing to be recognized before speaking,” said Covelli. She changed the projection to reveal a sleek-looking long-faced wizard with an alarming smile. “The wizarding governments of Europe were in turmoil in the 1870s, and the time was ripe for someone like Tramposo. He wanted to see the restrictions on secrecy lifted and a greater Europe established under the rule of the magical community. He intended to use the non-magical royals of the day as his tools. It was during such an attempt that Tramposo was found out by the Marquis de Maupassant.”

The Marquis’s image returned – older, but not sixty years older to Harry’s eye. “He was unable to rouse the Ministers of the day, and so he assembled a group that spread across Europe to contain Tramposo and his followers. This period was marked by infrequent but bloody battles, but it was Tramposo who suffered most of the losses each time.

“The Marquis’s colleague Boris Karensky took charge of the hunt in the east, working from St. Petersburg. Roger Potter... Mr. Potter’s great-great grandfather, I believe... organized the Germans. The Dumbledores looked after England and a goodly portion of France. Karensky took charge of the entire operation for a time while the Marquis dealt with a blood feud that resulted from his... ehh... indiscretions with the wife of an Italian count, but that is another matter...”

Harry reeled from the idea that he wasn't the first Potter to be part of the first line of defence against a dark wizard. As he thought on it, however, he supposed that the House of Potter must have acquired the title of 'Courageous' for a reason – a reason that came about long before Roger Potter took a stand.

"Tramposo was fond of using magical creatures in battle, both naturally occurring and those of his own design. The Marquis enlisted a friend of the Headmaster, our own Professor Croaker, to take charge of the offence against these creatures. Professor Croaker was forced to wipe out or contain entire species, some of which no longer live even in the history books. Some held him responsible in those days, but I assure you that this was the only means to put a stop to Tramposo. This vile man was in his own way every bit as horrible as your Voldemort –" Covelli stopped for a moment to allow the inevitable hisses and shuffling to stop.

"The Marquis and his closest colleagues eliminated Tramposo and his inner circle in a pitched battle near Barcelona. The battle began on October 22, 1886 and lasted nine days," Covelli said. The room grew quiet. Harry tried and failed to contemplate a nine-day fight between wizards like Dumbledore and Voldemort. The projections faded and then winked out entirely.

"In the end," Covelli said into the silence, "the Marquis and four of his comrades – Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor Croaker, Professor Marchbanks, and Tiberius Ogden – were all who remained alive on the field of battle. The Marquis returned to his château and did not leave it until the twentieth century dawned." Silence held once more until the signal came for the end of the class period.

Covelli cleared her throat. "You have your readings for the next session; be certain to continue research toward your end-of-term papers, please," she said. "We will take up with... with Grindelwald at next week's session..." She walked slowly to her desk and turned her back on the class as they gathered their things. Harry dashed out of the classroom well ahead of Hermione. He caught Pucey and Goyle just as they reached the stairs that led down to the dungeons.

Pucey went halfway for his wand before he realized it was Harry who pulled at his robe. He quickly recovered and said coolly, "Leave the sneaking to the snakes, Potter."

"Why did you have me take the points from Malfoy?" Harry demanded. He turned to Goyle and added, "Pucey baited him; and when Malfoy didn't bite, you went for it as well. Covelli would have done it if I hadn't been asked. I don't follow...?"

Pucey crossed his arms. "Have you ever heard of the Hogwarts Book of Punishments?"

"The... what?" Harry managed.

"I'm surprised; I'd have figured on you for a chapter of your own," Pucey chuckled. "You have heard of the Hogwarts Register of Births, correct?"

"You know...? The enchanted book that records each magical birth? The one old McGonagall uses?" said Goyle.

"Yes, I know about the Register," Harry said impatiently. "This Book of Punishments, it does the same with detentions or something?"

"Detentions, points – all of it," Pucey confirmed. "There's something about the Book that even a lot of pure families don't know, you see?"

"The parents can have it," Goyle said solemnly. "Every time there are points taken, they get an owl."

"What sort do you expect might make that arrangement?" Pucey asked.

Harry thought for a long moment. "So you wanted my name next to the points... what, in case Malfoy's dad ever collects his post? You figured that it might make Malfoy look better?"

"That's it in one," said Pucey.

Harry couldn't follow the reasoning. "But... it looks like you're trying to push him aside, right? Why do you care how he's seen?" he asked.

"Have to be Slytherin to understand it," Goyle said.

Harry shrugged. "Apparently," he said.

Pucey patted him on the shoulder. "No worries, Potter. I asked you to do it and you came through. That works in both directions." Goyle gave a stiff nod and they started down the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

October 6, 1996

Harry had gone from being merely busy to nearly frantic. He was continuously scheduled from eight in the morning until six in the evening, Monday through Saturday, with special tutorials on Monday and Thursday evenings. He read, he wrote, he analysed, he watched, and he fought. He assisted Detheridge with the first through third years, and he assisted Bill and Tonks with the Duelling Club – Harry was supposed to be in charge, but it rarely played out that way and he was happier for it. Dumbledore pulled him in at odd hours for tuition that ranged from managing one's emotions to the magic behind wizarding portraiture to handling student problems to means for permanent conjuring to various strategies for success in ten-pin bowling. Harry quickly learned to expect the unexpected with the Headmaster. In addition, Dumbledore continued to instruct Potions – 'my replacement is on his way', he regularly said – and a number of people including Harry were beginning to wonder if the Headmaster might end up splitting his time for the entire term.

Once he returned to the castle, Harry began to take his Sunday meals at the Gryffindor table. Some of the staff had been vocal in their opposition to this, but Harry had insisted and Dumbledore had prevailed upon the rest to accept the decision. It was his free day, and Harry wanted to maintain some sort of connection with people other than Ron and Hermione. He wanted to keep Neville close and Ginny as well. He wanted to look after Luna when he could manage it, and it was easier for him to ask after her on Sundays. Hermione,

Ginny, Neville and even Ron were also on 'Luna watch'. Hermione mentioned that she had some ideas about what might be affecting Luna, and Harry knew that Covelli had met with Luna more than once.

As the evening meal on Sunday the sixth of October came to a close, Harry wanted nothing more than to return to his quarters and gain an extra few hours of sleep. He was about to beg off early, when the doors to the Great Hall slammed open and Hagrid burst through.

"E's here at last, Perfesser Dumbledore! Do I bring him here, or would yeh want him off ta his rooms?" Hagrid called out.

"I expect he has been looking forward to his introduction," Dumbledore returned over a flurry of whispering. "Do ask his preference, Hagrid, but I dare say he will choose to meet us here."

"Righ'," Hagrid said. He disappeared into the corridor for a few moments, and then returned. "Yeh had him in one, Perfesser," the giant gamekeeper laughed. He walked down the centre of the hall and took his seat at the head table.

Harry stifled a laugh when the unknown guest entered the hall. A stunning young woman in a sleek gold robe walked at his right. Hermione took in a sharp breath. "What's he doing here?" Ron whispered.

The man doffed his hat. "Felicitations to you, people of Hogwarts!" he said. "I am your humble servant, Alexandre, the Marquis de Maupassant. As to your, ehh, vacant post for the Potions... she is no more, for I shall be teaching you on the morrow."

Dumbledore put on a mischief-laced grin that gave Harry pause. "Splendid to see you, Marquis! Would you be so kind as to introduce your associate?"

"But of course! A wizard of such advanced age as myself cannot manage his affairs without the help, you see? I am so fortunate to have the help of a lady as lovely and accomplished as this. She -" He directed the attention of the hall to the dark-haired beauty beside him. "She is Mademoiselle Anna de Flandres. The father of Mlle. de

Flandres, he is Achille de Flandres, Ministre de la Magie for Belgium. Mlle. de Flandres was schooled at the Scuola di Magia e Stregoneria in Venice, and she has the Mastery in Potions from the International Confederation. She studies with me now for the Mastery in Alchemy. Mlle. de Flandres, she will be the last of my apprentices.”

“Thank you, Marquis; and welcome to Hogwarts, Miss de Flandres,” Dumbledore declared. “Obviously, some of you – especially those young men who come from established wizarding families – are familiar with the Marquis' infamous manual, Scandalous Tactics for Duelling. I assure you that this is far from the pinnacle of his long and illustrious career. The Marquis, like myself, apprenticed with Nicholas Flamel and is a formidable potions scholar. He has served his people with distinction for more than two hundred years and has been the official representative of France to the International Confederation of Wizards since 1903.

“The Marquis will be taking up residence in the south tower, which has been unoccupied for many a year. Potions instruction will be moving to the tower as well. Your prefects will distribute additional information at tomorrow's breakfast. Should any additional texts be required, they will be provided to you all as a courtesy. It is also my pleasure to announce that, in addition to taking up the post of Professor of Potions, the Marquis has consented to serve as the Slytherin Head of House for the remainder of this year.”

Harry didn't know what to make of the reaction from the Slytherins. It occurred to him that this was because the Slytherins didn't know what to make of the Marquis. Adrian Pucey was the first to stand and applaud; he was quickly joined by Malfoy. The combination appeared to stir the rest of the upper form students, who were then followed by the younger years.

“Please, please... resume the sitting, please,” the Marquis insisted. “I, eh, relish the chance to do this for Hogwarts. I am not a young man, but I remember well my good and noble friends who came to me from the house of Slytherin. They understood the honour and they understood the meaning – the purpose – of cunning. My young snakes, we will remember that to be the Slytherins is to be, eh...”

how you say...?" He turned to Mlle. de Flandres, and rattled off, "Les maitres de nos destinees...?"

She hesitated for a moment, and then said in a flowing accent, "You will remember to be the masters of your destinies."

"Yes, yes... these are the words," the Marquis said. He drew his sword with frightening speed – so quickly that the Hufflepuffs near him ducked for cover – and held it before him, point up. "I salute you, Hogwarts. Perhaps you will decide that the last Potions Master, he was not so bad – who can say?" He replaced his sword in its scabbard and bowed to the head table. "If you will grant me leave, Mugwump Dumbledore? I am unaccustomed to the travel and must rest these old bones."

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "By all means, Marquis. Hagrid, would you... no, no. Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to direct the Marquis? He will be in the south tower."

Harry spoke up, "Er... the south tower, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore laughed, "Of course! It has been many a year, after all. Take the Marquis and his associate to the first floor landing and then to the right. From there, the portraits will guide you."

"Best I follow along with the luggage, Perfesser," Hagrid said. "These two, they don't travel light."

The Marquis replaced his sword in its scabbard. He flashed a broad smile at Harry, reached out, and clasped both of Harry's hands. "Monsieur Potter... how excellent to see you once again!" he said.

"Er... a pleasure, sir," returned Harry.

"And Mlle. Granger... I remain enchanted," the Marquis said. He released Harry, leant toward Hermione and kissed her on each cheek. While she spluttered, he straightened and thrust his arm across the table. "Monsieur Weasley, how fare you, my young chevalier?"



“Very well, sir,” Ron squeaked. He gestured awkwardly toward Neville. “Uh... this is...”

Neville stood and bowed slightly. “Marquis, I am Neville Longbottom, of the houses of Longbottom, Croaker and Castor. It is an honour, sir.” Ron gaped at him, and both Parvati and Ginny studied him rather intensely.

“Monsieur Longbottom, I know of your families; the honour is mine, young sir,” the Marquis said in very formal fashion. “You are of the same house as Algernon, yes?”

Neville nodded. “Yes, sir; he’s seated right there at the —”

“I see him there, yes,” the Marquis said dismissively. “Algie and I, we are fully acquainted. He is a brilliant man, no? Still, he is... ehh... quelle bourrique!” Lavender nearly spat pumpkin juice at that, and then broke into a fit of coughing.

Mlle. de Flandres let her hand rest on the Marquis’ arm. “Pardon, Your Grace, but you were intending to refrain from... public judgments...?” she said.

The Marquis patted her hand. “Of course, of course,” he said. “There is nothing to fear, dear girl; I am the old fool... this is known by all, yes?” He turned to Harry and continued, “Monsieur Potter, I am ready to be taken to my rooms. You will escort my apprentice.”

With that, the Marquis began to issue rapid-fire instructions to Hagrid regarding the luggage. Harry was sure that at least some of them were in French, and Hagrid did a good deal of nodding. Anna de Flandres crooked her arm and stood patiently until Harry realized that he was expected to take her arm. He did so uncomfortably, and saw that Hermione was watching with a smirk on her lips.

No words were spoken as they walked down the first floor corridor. Mlle. de Flandres kept her hold on Harry’s arm, and even tightened it at the sight of a clutch of castle ghosts. The Marquis was chatting away with Hagrid, who seemed amused both by the Marquis and by the directions coming from the portraits.

"You are not what I expected, Mr. Potter," she said abruptly.

Harry answered with a start, "What did you expect, exactly?"

"The Marquis, he described a chevalier – friend of the goblins, defender of the downtrodden, vanquisher of dark wizards," Mlle. de Flandres said. "You seem... common."

Harry voice tightened. "I see."

"I do not say this to offend," she added. "The Marquis is an extravagant man; he enjoys the trappings of wealth and power. Your Headmaster, he exudes power. I assume that you can feel this. You seem a common man – an ordinary man – though you, too, give off an aura of power. You are unaffected by your accomplishments. This is an unexpected quality, an attractive quality. You are an attractive man... if a bit shorter than I would have thought."

"I get that rather a lot – the comment about being short, that is," Harry said.

"Size is not equal to greatness," she countered. "Napoleon, he was a very short man."

"Erm... are you flirting with me?" Harry asked.

Mlle. de Flandres drew back from him and searched his face with her eyes before she broke into a soft laugh. "But of course – outrageously so," she said.

Harry was taken aback. "Why?" he asked.

"We have a mutual friend, you and I: Fleur Delacour..." she said.

"Really? You know Fleur well?"

"Fleur's father is a diplomat. My father and he operate in the same circles, and our families have been well acquainted for a century or more," said Mlle. de Flandres. "When I asked after you, Fleur told me

that it would be best if I were very direct in my intentions. Have I not been direct?"

"Very direct," Harry said.

"By coming to Hogwarts, I will be able to complete my studies with the Marquis and pursue you as a partner," she said simply.

Harry stammered, "A p-partner? Look, you're attractive – very attractive... er... very, very attractive... gorgeous, actually... but I'm already... uh... in partnership, and there's Voldemort to think of, and you must be five years or more –"

Mlle. de Flandres' brow creased. "This is all the more reason to diversify your interests, Mr. Potter."

"Diversify...? I... er... I've not heard it put that way..." managed Harry.

"Is that so? But why...? Oh – oh, my; the words were chosen poorly," she said. "I was not referring to pursuit of a sexual partner or marriage partner – although I certainly wouldn't dismiss those possibilities."

"Gkkk," Harry said, or something very like it.

"I was referring to a business partnership, of course," Mlle. de Flandres assured him. "The Marquis has offered me the opportunity to acquire his horticultural concerns, but even with my family's resources this will require a minority partner. I feel there is an opportunity to not only improve the quality of patent potions but also to control the European market."

"I... uh... I'll put you in contact with Ted Tonks; he handles my money – that sort of thing," Harry said quickly.

"Really? You would do that? Oh, how excellent! I shall have to thank Fleur... and thank you," she said happily and bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. Mlle. de Flandres bounced very pleasantly, Harry decided, just before she leant in and kissed him on both cheeks.

Harry managed to get out, "Hagrid? How far is this tower, anyway?"

Hagrid called back, "Just 'round the bend, Harry – erf! Bloody luggage... has a mind of its own, eh?"

The south tower was much lower than the others, just three floors from bottom to top. The first floor was dominated by a bright and airy potions classroom with a very modern look to it. Stairs led to the second floor, which included two offices and quarters for Mlle. de Flandres. The third floor was given over to the Marquis. His chambers were massive and opulently furnished. Mlle. de Flandres took charge of the luggage and the Marquis strolled from room to room.

"I will make do with this," he announced at last.

\* \* \* \* \*

October 8, 1996

Covelli's projector came to life. The lights in the History classroom dimmed, and an angular face appeared above her desk. It was familiar and large - larger than the floating heads from the previous class – and a collective gasp filled the room.

Her voice sliced through the air. "Grindelwald," she said, which brought a second gasp.

She began to pace along the aisle that divided the students in two. "He was a philosopher who became a politician, and a politician who became a zealot and a mass murderer, on a scale never seen or even imagined in the wizarding world," she explained. "Miss... Greengrass, who was this man? Where did he come from? How did he rise?"

Daphne Greengrass sat bolt upright. "Er... Grindelwald was born in 1862 in Austria, to pure-blooded parents reputedly tied to the Knights of Walpurgis. He -"

Covelli cut her off. "What was his name?"

Daphne hesitated for a moment. "His name was Grindelwald. That's all he was called: Grindelwald."

"Two points to Slytherin for the first portion of your answer," Covelli said. "Anyone?"

Anthony Goldstein raised his hand. "Walden Grindelius Ollivander," he said.

"Three points to Ravenclaw," said Covelli.

"Ollivander? Not the Ollivander?" Dean Thomas blurted out.

Anthony shook his head. "They were first cousins, twice removed," he said, "but dark wizardry runs in the family. My wand's from Gregorovitch, thank you very much."

Covelli drew her wand and cast illuminated letters into the air; they were soft and solid, unlike the flaming letters Tom Riddle had used.

O L L I V A N D E R

She slowly repositioned the letters and used her body to partially block the view until she finished the task. As soon as her wand was put away, she stepped aside to reveal the new words:

A N \_ E V I L \_ L O R D

"I can't believe I didn't see that," Anthony murmured.

"Some believe that the family was cursed many centuries ago," said Covelli. "For whatever reason, the various branches of the Ollivander family produce a dangerously dark wizard every few generations. Ollivander used his first and middle name to create Grindelwald, but he was also paying homage to a minor dark wizard called Uberwald. Uberwald was a friend of the Austrian Ollivanders who started an uprising over encroachment by non-magical folk into the mountain region where he lived. After sacking the homes and lands of several dozen settlers, he attempted to infect an entire village with dragon pox. Uberwald unwittingly discovered that non-magicals cannot

contract the disease; instead, he and his fellows accidentally infected themselves and all died shortly thereafter.

“Grindelwald completed his studies at Durmstrang under the Ollivander name, and then took up the study of philosophy at a non-magical university in Sweden -”

Pucey raised his hand. “A university, ma'am? That's the sort of place you attended to become a doctor, right?”

“Well recalled, Mr. Pucey – one point to Slytherin,” Covelli said. “Ollivander completed a doctor of philosophy degree, thus earning the privilege to refer to himself as a doctor. It was at about this time that he experienced a series of very negative incidents involving non-magical people, including thefts, assaults and the murder of a close friend. A few months later, he saved a close wizarding friend from possible death at the hands of a group of rural non-magicals who were in fervour over witchcraft. It was then that he adopted the name Oliver Grindelwald, and began to write a series of tracts about relationships between magical and non-magical people. He grew increasingly bitter, and began to be seen in Austria as a voice for even greater separation. Now then, how did Grindelwald begin his rise to power?”

Hermione raised her hand. “He was elected to the Cisleithanian Court in 1908, and appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1914,” she said.

“Correct – two points to Gryffindor,” Covelli said. “By the time he rose to Vice-Chancellor, his adopted first name was rarely used; he was merely referred to as Grindelwald. What happened in 1914 that changed the social and political landscape in Europe? Anyone? Those of you with a non-magical upbringing may have an advantage here...”

Terry Boot tentatively raised his hand. “That's when the Muggles started their world war, isn't it? Some royal was shot during a visit to the Balkans, and then everything went pear-shaped.”

“Professor Tonks must be changing the Muggle Studies course rather significantly,” Covelli said. “Two points to Ravenclaw, Mr. Boot. The

First World War began in 1914 and proceeded until 1918. The War left Germany in ruins, opened the door for the Communists to take over Russia, and ushered in an era of economic instability that culminated in a world wide economic depression by the end of the 1920s. All of this affected the magical community across Europe as well, to a far greater extent than wizards of the day recognised. Suddenly food was scarce; the cost to maintain secrecy increased dramatically, and the war had destroyed major magical creature preserves, goblin mines, and other significant resources. As non-magical Germany descended into chaos, magical Germany followed. The Austrian Chancellor for Magic resigned under duress, and Grindelwald was elevated. By 1930, he had consolidated the magical governments of Austria and Germany and had moved the seat of government to Salzburg.

“Grindelwald used his 1933 address to the International Confederation of Wizards to speak on what he termed 'the natural development of the human species'. You will read the text of this speech for the next session, at which time we will discuss its implications for today's wizarding community. At the time, the implications were perfectly clear. Grindelwald believed that it was the right of the magical community to control the world, magical and non-magical alike. He believed that magical people represented the next stage of human development, and therefore that non-magical people were inferior and could not be trusted to manage their own affairs. He believed that non-magical people had to be shown a 'firm hand', whether by wizards or by their own leaders, and he was increasingly attracted to the policies of the non-magical German leader Adolf Hitler.”

Harry couldn't help but notice that Covelli was growing pale and her right hand was shaking. By Hermione's reaction, he was sure that she noticed the same. Still, Covelli kept on. “By 1934, he saw Hitler as the perfect tool for subjugating the non-magical people of Europe,” she said. “Hitler and his minions were fascinated by the non-magical world's idea of magic and the occult, and Grindelwald played to this fascination. By 1936, a number of Grindelwald's lieutenants were implanted into the upper echelons of Hitler's Nazi Party. Here are some of the wizards and witches involved.” The projector clicked, and a series of smaller heads replaced that of Grindelwald. She looked to

the first one on the left, and blanched. "One of Grindelwald's chief associates... Otto Bormann... was a cousin of... he was a cousin..."

Anthony Goldstein started to stand. "Dr. Covelli...?"

Covelli slumped against her desk and babbled, "...was a cousin to Martin Bormann, who was Hitler's right hand... Martin Bormann died in the spring of 1945, but Otto... some thought he was dead, but I knew better... they'd gone to ground and they had help, help in high places... I tracked him for weeks, months..." She stumbled forward and Ron burst from his seat to catch her.

"Help me out here, Goldstein," Ron groaned.

"He had to die..." Covelli murmured. Her hair blew as if in a breeze, even though the room was still.

"Send for Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said.

"There was someone called Bormann, in the memory I saw," Harry recalled.

"Send for Professor Dumbledore – now!" repeated Hermione. Harry drew his wand and cast his stag Patronus twice in the direction of the Headmaster's study. Hermione followed with a half-dozen castings of her otter in a variety of directions.

"I'll fetch Pomfrey," Pucey said. "Greg, help them carry the Professor to her study -"

Ron shook his head. "We're not going farther than the desk," he said; "There's something really wrong here..."

Hermione dashed to the desk and Harry followed Pucey out the door and into the corridor. "Be sure that the hearth in the Professor's office is unblocked," Pucey called back as he took to the stairs in a dead sprint.



Harry turned back toward the classroom and nearly ran into Professor Croaker, who was panting and huffing. "Did that otter belong to a student? Fine piece of work, that," he managed.

"Come with me," Harry said.

Somehow Croaker managed to enter the classroom first. He started, "What have you gotten up to now, Lucia... oh, dear..."

Professor Marchbanks ambled into the room next; her cane thumped loudly against the stone floor. "Good heavens, has she been telling you children of the days of Grindelwald?" she bellowed. "Would someone do us all a favour and cancel the charm on that blasted apparatus, please? You there – Longbottom, isn't it? I think we've all seen quite enough of those ghastly faces."

Croaker waved his wand mildly in the direction of Covelli. "Her magic's a bit off, but it's nothing Albus or Alex – or I, for that matter – can't reckon with," he pronounced.

"The girl's magic has always been a bit off," Marchbanks declared, "but her heart was in the right place. Now do you see...? This is what comes of having the Ministry interfere in the content and conduct of teaching and examinations. The poor dear has no business discussing those dark times, none whatever. Where are her notes, Algernon?"

"Most likely on the lectern," Croaker said absently. "Lucia...? Can you hear me? If you can, it would be good form to say so..."

Marchbanks leafed through a stack of parchments and a Muggle notebook. "She always was the well organised one," she said fondly.

Pucey returned to the room. "Pomfrey's nowhere to be found, but the Headmaster's on his way. I think the Marquis was headed in this direction as well."

"Splendid! Alex is the best one to sort this out, I should think," Croaker said. "So... shall I finish the lecture, or would you rather have a go at it, Zelda?"

"My name is Griselda, you oaf, and I'll thank you to speak it properly," Marchbanks returned. "If I am reading correctly... Professor Covelli had reached the latter 1930s...?"

"Do you seriously intend to continue?" drawled Malfoy. "A number of my fellow students seem rather disturbed by all of this."

The Headmaster swept into the classroom. "Your concern is touching, Mr. Malfoy, but Dr. Covelli would not appreciate a disruption in your tuition – even if she is the cause," he said. "The Marquis will join us shortly. Professor Croaker, if you could relocate Dr. Covelli to her office? Mr. Weasley, Mr. Goldstein, please assist Professor Croaker in any way that he asks."

"Would you prefer to take this lesson, Professor Dumbledore?" Marchbanks asked. "There is no one more qualified to speak on the topic of Grindelwald."

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "Do you know... my goodness... do you know that I've never really spoken on the topic? Isn't that odd?"

"Given the things we saw, the things that we experienced, I do not find it odd at all," Marchbanks returned.

"What has young Lucia done with herself, Albus?" the Marquis called from the doorway. "I do not relish putting back together what she has torn asunder. It was my understanding that the return to Hogwarts, it would settle this for all time?"

"We will speak of this later," said Dumbledore. "Marcus, were you sent for?"

Detheridge stood immediately behind the Marquis. "Is she all right?" he asked.

"She will be fine, Marcus – of this you can be certain," Dumbledore told him.

Detheridge seemed to fight an internal battle before he said, "Tell her... tell her that he's dead, Albus. He's stone dead. She'll understand, I think. Tell her I can explain myself later."

"Is it true that you will tell these young people of Grindelwald?" the Marquis asked.

"It would seem to be so," said Dumbledore.

The Marquis nodded. "I will tend to Lucia," he said. "Perhaps I will join you in the telling? It seems strange that five of us are present here, does it not?"

"It does indeed," Dumbledore said softly.

Marchbanks let out a great harrumph. "Are you going to get on with it, or should I make a futile attempt to count my liver spots?" she demanded.

"There is no need to be rude," the Marquis scolded her.

"You've had no right to criticise my behaviour since sometime in the nineteenth century," Marchbanks fired back loudly. "Go and do your work, and I shall do mine."

"You are a stubborn old woman," said the Marquis, to a chorus of barely stifled snickers.

Marchbanks waved her cane at him. "And you, sir, are a lecherous old fool. Go," she snapped.

The snickers turned to snorts before Dumbledore settled the class. "As amusing as this by-play has been, we have a limited time available to us and I am – as Professor Marchbanks rightly observed – the rank expert on Grindelwald. Where should I begin, Professor?" he asked.

"Lucia was speaking on Grindelwald's chief minions and drawing comparisons to those Nazi chaps," said Marchbanks.

"I see... My preference is to focus on the major events themselves. If there are comparisons to be drawn, then let them be drawn against the present time," Dumbledore declared. "Miss Granger, would you be so kind as to pass me Dr. Covelli's projections?"

He quickly flipped through the small stack and nodded approvingly, then handed back one projection to Hermione. "Would you please cast that one for me?" he asked.

A map of Europe appeared above Covelli's desk. There was a modest patch of red drawn on the east-central part of the continent. "This was the extent of Grindelwald's control in 1928," Dumbledore said. He waved his wand slightly and the red stain spread into a good part of what Harry knew to be Germany. "This was the area of his control in 1931, after the German magical community was brought under the jurisdiction of the Austrian ministry." With another wave, the red spread over Switzerland and Poland and parts of Eastern Europe. "By 1937, Grindelwald had declared this area to be Cisleithania, which was the old form for Austria and Hungary. In each new area of conquest, he made the argument that the magical community was no longer in control of its affairs with respect to the Muggles, and that the magical community needed to purify its position. In 1938, his government began to seize Muggle-born children from their families by the age of one, to be raised by the state and instructed in the ways of a proper witch or wizard – as Grindelwald saw that to be, of course."

Now the red stain covered most of France and the Low Countries. "Grindelwald's men followed the Muggle armies of Hitler into France," Dumbledore told the class. "It was in France that for the first time, Grindelwald ordered the elimination of certain wizarding communities that he considered threatening to his vision of purity."

Seamus Finnigan raised his hand. "Er... so Grindelwald was a blood purist, then – like You-Know-Who?"

"It was a different sort of purity, young man," Marchbanks cut in. "Grindelwald wanted wizards to be purely that, and not to sully themselves with Muggles and the like. He wanted to kill wizards who disagreed, and to kill Muggles who might have stood in the way. He

wanted Muggles to openly know of magic and to be scared witless of it. In Grindelwald's perfect world, wizards would have ruled all and Muggles would have lived at their mercy."

"True enough," said Dumbledore, "but he hadn't counted on just how powerful Muggles really were. It wasn't until 1939 that he saw personally what the Muggle armies could accomplish – what sheer devastation they could deliver upon their enemies. He was frightened by it. He charged his infiltrators inside the German Muggle government to find ways that its armies could be used to do Grindelwald's work, even as he himself delved into ever darker and more powerful magic. It was his desire to create a magic that would exceed the power of the greatest and most terrible forces that the Muggles could bring to bear."

"And that's when he made the same mistake that a dozen wizard leaders and probably that many Muggles made before him," Marchbanks said. "He went after the Russians. Bad business, that was."

"Simultaneous to that, Grindelwald's western forces followed the German Muggles against the British," Dumbledore went on. "Many ships were sunk, supplies were destroyed, and small bands of his followers conducted raids on British soil. The worst of these was in 1940. The German Muggles launched an attack on London itself, using their flying machines, and a group of Grindelwald's wizards supported the attack from the ground; most of the Muggles were unaware of this, of course. Because of this, the damage was far greater than the worst that the Muggles could have delivered. The young daughter of the English king, Princess Elizabeth, was killed and the king himself wounded. Several well-known London landmarks were damaged or destroyed. The Ministry for Magic repaired many of them on the very night of the attacks, as a measure of good will toward our countrymen. Professor Flitwick and I took charge of the reconstruction of Big Ben. The two of us completed the job in less than six hours – which was no mean feat, if I do say so myself."

Hermione's eyebrows rose nearly to her hairline. "B-Big Ben was destroyed?" she gasped.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, as well as Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle, the London Bridge, Kew Gardens... it was a horrific night, Miss Granger. It took the combined efforts of scores of witches and wizards to undo even a portion of the damage. Our focus was on the true landmarks of Britain and on those things that the Muggle community could not have repaired on their own. Ask Professor Sprout about the restoration of the Gardens if you are so inclined; her parents were noted herbologists and thus in the thick of it. Our own Marquis de Maupassant arrived before the dawn and mobilised a group of goblin miners and masons to replace and reposition a goodly part of Stonehenge. Unfortunately, the circle at Avebury was too badly damaged to completely restore. Some of Britain's ley lines shifted position as a result, which disrupted Floo service for nearly two years."

"Why don't you tell them what they did to Golders Green?" Anthony Goldstein said bitterly. "They didn't stop with buildings, did they?"

"No, Grindelwald's raiders did not merely destroy buildings. The three largest raids all affected the families of persons in this very class, as a matter of fact," Dumbledore said. "I confess that I know the least about the Golders Green affair, amongst the three. A raid upon Hogsmeade left several dozen dead and wounded, and destroyed nearly half the buildings therein. Amongst the dead were several of Professor Marchbanks' extended family, as well as Mr. Weasley's grand-uncle and Miss Brown's grandmother -"

"The second started as an attack on agriculture," Marchbanks said. "Those blasted Cissies set afire more than half the wizarding farms in Britain, and then set to killing the farm families. Mr. Goyle, I know that your family suffered greatly in those attacks."

"Lost everything that mattered," Goyle said in a dangerous voice. Harry was surprised at how angry he seemed about something that had happened forty years before he was born.

Professor Croaker appeared at the door to Covelli's office. "She'll be right as rain in a day or so," he announced.

"What can you say about Golders Green?" Dumbledore asked him.

Croaker looked for a moment as though all the air had gone out of him. "A horrible thing, Albus. What possessed you to bring that up?"

"We were discussing the atrocities of Grindelwald's raiders, and Mr. Goldstein raised the point," said Dumbledore.

"Are there Mystics in your family, Mr. Goldstein?" Croaker asked.

Goldstein's eyes hardened. "There were," he said.

Dumbledore sighed. "Ah, yes – the Hebrew purges. This was an area where Grindelwald's influence weighed upon the German Muggles in catastrophic fashion."

Croaker settled his girth against the edge of Covelli's desk. "I may not do this justice, Mr. Goldstein, so I will allow you to interject if you feel the need to do so," he said. "There is a small magical community amongst the Hebrew people. I know that this community has a Hebrew name, but I don't know it; I'm not certain that any outsiders do. You'll find little mention of it in any libraries, even those as extensive as our own here at Hogwarts. Those few mentions will refer to the leaders of this community as Mystics. Stop me if I speak wrongly, Mr. Goldstein..."

"That's accurate," Goldstein allowed.

"There is a religious component to the practices of the Mystics, and I shan't speak on that as I'm thoroughly unqualified to speak of it and thus quite likely to put my foot in it, as it were," Croaker continued. "The rest of the Hebrew magical community has typically consisted of traders and merchants, and in many places they were the main link between the magical and Muggle communities. I imagine that some of you can see where this is headed?"

"They sound like the sort of people Grindelwald would have wanted to kill," Lavender said.

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Two points to Gryffindor, I am afraid to say."

"Much of this community went to ground in the 1930s, and Grindelwald encouraged the German Muggles to purge their Hebrew communities in hopes of catching the wizards unawares," Croaker said.

Goldstein shook his head. "That would have been a spark in a flaming cauldron, Professor," he said. "Hitler didn't need any help to hate Jews; he got there on his own."

"As I said, I am no expert on the matter," Croaker said. "I am aware of what this Hitler fellow went on to do, and can only tell you the prevailing wizarding view – which is that Grindelwald pressed the issue. With respect to Golders Green, this was one circumstance where Grindelwald's men didn't wait for the German Muggles to do their work. They rounded up more than a hundred Hebrew wizards and witches, and executed them in the middle of a major thoroughfare. It was a gruesome message to the British Ministry that doing business with the Muggles would no longer be tolerated."

The room went deadly silent; even Malfoy looked aghast. Goldstein's voice cut through the room. "Now You-Know-Who's at it," he said. "It's starting again, and no one's going to do anything about it."

Dumbledore folded his hands and said gravely, "Mr. Goldstein, I am very sorry for your loss. Your father was a brave man, brave enough to refuse Voldemort's business. If he had sought protection from the Ministry, it would have been given -"

Goldstein's knuckles were white, Harry noticed. "With all due respect, sir... bollocks. You-Know-Who's trying to wipe out the old magics; my father said so. You're right that he was a brave man, but he didn't die over a shipment of cauldrons. He died for what he believed."

"Your choice of words is forgiven, Anthony; these are most trying times," Dumbledore said in a quiet but commanding way. "If your family should need anything...?"



"The Ministry won't lift a finger," Goldstein snapped, then added more calmly, "but thank you for your concern, sir."

"Then you will come to me directly, young man, and it shall be done," said Dumbledore in a tone that brooked no argument.

"My mother wants the head of the wizard who killed my father. Is that something you can arrange, Headmaster?" Goldstein said boldly.

Dumbledore's brow moved ever so slightly; he said, "Alas, no. If you should desire to absent yourself from the remainder of this session, both Dr. Covelli and I would understand your reasoning."

"No thank you, sir," said Goldstein. "I shan't hide from the truth; that's the Minister's job."

"Five points to Ravenclaw," Marchbanks declared.

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Griselda!" he protested.

Marchbanks gave the slightest of shrugs. "It was an honest appraisal, Albus. Let's move on to the meat of this, shall we?" she said.

Croaker shook his head at Marchbanks, but turned his attention to Goldstein. "The killings at Golders Green finally stirred the Ministry. It was the first time they realised that Grindelwald might actually be capable of taking the country. However, a new roadblock replaced the old one: the International Confederation of Wizards." He gave Dumbledore a sour look.

"The Confederation has done much good work over the years, but they very nearly cost us the whole of Europe," admitted Dumbledore. "Wizarding governments have been prohibited from raising armies for more than three hundred years. Grindelwald had clearly raised an army, but he refrained from calling it such. His men were organised under the auspices of an ancient magical order called the Knights of Walpurgis. They were supported entirely by Grindelwald's coffers, of course. The Confederation decided that Grindelwald had not raised an army, and therefore prohibited any organised effort on the part of other wizarding governments to oppose him. It was foolhardy and

absurd. The Supreme Mugwump of the day, a wizard named Althorp from South Africa, wanted to open talks with Grindelwald and establish new permanent borders in Europe. Several countries threatened to pull out of the Confederation; I am sorry to say that our own was not one of them.”

The Marquis emerged from Covelli's office. “Ahh, you are speaking of our blind colleagues, yes?” He gave a Gallic shrug. “There is much you can do without the governments. You must have enough of the gold and, ehh... avoir des couilles? Yes, yes... you must, ehh, have the balls.” Dumbledore pressed his hand to his forehead and winced, even as Marchbanks scowled and most of the class coughed or howled and both Seamus and Dean bowed and scraped to the Marquis.

“What, is this not so?” the Marquis pouted.

Marchbanks banged her cane against the lectern to recapture the class. “Tactful as always, Alex,” she said. “With the Marquis' gold and... considerable fortitude... behind us, we pressed ahead on our own and established a network around the world to monitor Grindelwald's forces and eventually to take them on in well-planned circumstances.”

“By 1945, there were thirteen of us,” said Dumbledore. “In addition to myself, the Marquis, Professor Marchbanks, Professor Croaker and Professor Flitwick, we were joined by Tiberius Ogden; Kanzan Yatsusana, a Japanese exile and grandson of Flamel's apprentice Takeda Yatsusana; David Narrandarrie, an Australian colleague of Kanzan; John Bear, who was the attaché to the American consul in London; Telma Sigurdsdottir, a war witch from Iceland; and two young apprentices: Lucia Greengrass, who was my apprentice and is now your History instructor, and Oscar Pomfrey, who is Madam Pomfrey's brother and was apprenticed to Professor Flitwick.”

“There was also Vladimir Karensky,” Professor Croaker added. “He was the grandson of another of Flamel's apprentices, Boris Karensky. Vladimir worked for the Russian Muggle government – the Soviets – and he was our man on the eastern front. Kanzan kept an eye on Grindelwald's Asian allies; he was based in Tibet at first, and then the

Philippines. David went back and forth from south Asia to the Pacific. John went back across the pond to put a stop to a wizard named Joshua Warren, who was a Grindelwald sympathizer of some influence in two of the American governments. Telma, Tiberius and I were responsible for developing an answer to Grindelwald's magic, and Lucia eventually ended up working with us. Pomfrey and Flitwick were infiltrators; they spent most of the last two years of the war in Germany and Switzerland. Griselda here was our liaison to the ministries and the Confederation. It took until 1944 to get the Confederation to loosen the rules on armies, but then Britain and Iceland and the Scandinavian countries hit with a vengeance."

"What were you doing, Headmaster?" Pucey asked Dumbledore.

"If you remove the head of a beast, the body dies," Dumbledore said. "When I wasn't teaching here at Hogwarts, I was attempting to assassinate Grindelwald."

Pucey's eyes grew wide, and Goyle said what everyone was thinking: "Bloody hell, you were out tryin' to off him on your own?"

"One point from Slytherin, Mr. Goyle," Croaker said; "I know that it's rather shocking, but do try to mind your language."

"I led a group of Hit Wizards in several attempts to track Grindelwald, isolate him and either bring him to justice or kill him," Dumbledore said. "We were under no illusions that he would be subdued."

"Eventually, we did develop a counter to Grindelwald's new magics -" Croaker began.

"How did you manage it, Professor, if Grindelwald was seeking something as powerful as Muggle weapons?" Hermione asked.

"One point from Gryffindor; raise your hand to be acknowledged, Miss Granger," said Croaker; he went on, "It wasn't a simple matter, and unfortunately it didn't come in time to save the city of Dresden from Grindelwald's firestorms."

"But that was from a Muggle bombing..." Hermione said uncertainly.

"The Muggle flying machines did drop explosives that day, but nothing on the order necessary to devastate an entire city," said Dumbledore. "The Confederation used the Muggles as a means to cover Grindelwald's actions. You see, Grindelwald was so disenchanted with the ineffectiveness of the German Muggles that he began to destroy them himself. He was quite mad at the end."

"I assume that the atomic explosions in Japan were caused by the Muggles...?" Hermione asked.

"Indeed they were," Dumbledore said. "Kanzan and I visited one of the affected regions in the winter of 1945. I do not recommend it, even today. The echoes of death are in the very air; it is unbearable."

Goyle raised his hand. "So, Headmaster, you and your Hit Wizards, you got 'im in the end?" he asked.

Dumbledore appeared unsteady for a moment, enough that Harry was prepared to leave his seat. "Grindelwald was completely imbued with the magic he had sought," he said at last. "The countering ritual had to be applied directly to him. I defeated him in single combat, but we knew he could never be contained; the power within him would have continued to grow until something was consumed – either Grindelwald himself or the rest of the magical world. It took all thirteen of us to subdue the magic." There was another lengthy pause before he declared, "Pray that you are never required to act as we did. I will say no more on this."

The signal for the end of the session sounded, but Dumbledore motioned for the class to remain. "With regard to your assignment -" he began, to considerable grumbling; "Oh yes, I'm afraid you won't escape that. You will complete four feet of parchment on the relevance of the war with Grindelwald to today's wizarding world, with attention to politics, business or magical practice; you may choose one or all three areas of attention – it matters not to me. You will submit your assignments at the next class session. I will be grading your work personally... I believe that I've earned that right."

Dumbledore stopped Harry as he was following the students into the corridor. "This was your first lecture on the fall of Grindelwald," the Headmaster said; "I suspect it will not be your last. Please complete the assignment and submit it to me at our next meeting."

\* \* \* \* \*

October 12, 1996

Harry had thought Dumbledore would assign him one of the rooms set aside for the times when a Gryffindor served as a Head Student. A small part of him had hoped for it, in truth; he would have lived in the room once occupied by one or both of his parents. Instead, he had been given the suite of rooms intended for the Gryffindor Head of House. Professor McGonagall had moved to rooms nearer to the Great Hall and overlooking the grounds upon her elevation to Deputy Headmistress thirteen years prior; before that, the Slytherin head – a fellow called Slughorn – had held the post.

He had his own bedroom and washroom, a nicely appointed study, a public office, and a spacious sitting room with a dining table for four in one corner. His view from the sitting room was of the courtyard, and he could see the lake and one end of the Quidditch pitch from his bedroom. There was even a balcony of sorts (Covelli called it a 'loggia') just off the sitting room. He'd been sorely tempted one afternoon to step out and lob something at Malfoy, but had thought better of it.

The entry to his rooms was one door beyond the Gryffindor portrait hole and down a short corridor, and he often encountered his old housemates. He was hopeful that he wouldn't encounter anyone just then, as he walked stiffly up the stairs. Detheridge had shown him no mercy whatever in an exceptionally fierce fight – the Defence professor had called it a 'contest' as opposed to a duel. For his part, Harry had called it painful.

He waited a moment for the small portrait beside the door to acknowledge him and then stumbled inside. As soon as his satchel was on the table, he doffed his shirt and began to painfully stretch his shoulders.

Small pops were becoming so commonplace to Harry that he scarcely noticed anymore. "Does Professor Potter be needing a healing draught?" asked a squeaky voice.

"I'm not a professor, Spat," Harry said wearily.

"Does Not-Professor Potter be needing a healing draught? Spat returned.

"I'll be fine," Harry grumbled.

"Not-Professor Potter surely needs a butterbeer after being thrown about by Professor Detheridge?" Spat went on.

"Yeah... wouldn't mind a butterbeer," admitted Harry.

Spat went still for a moment and then said, "Spat will fetch two butterbeers and treacle tarts."

Harry was perplexed. "Two butterbeers?"

Spat gave a sharp nod. "She-Who-Once-Knitted approaches your rooms as we speak," he said.

"I told you not to call her that," Harry snapped.

"Not-Professor Potter told Spat that he could no longer call She-Who-Once-Knitted by the name of She-Who-Knits," said Spat proudly.

Harry groaned; he demanded, "You will call her by her given name – is that understood?"

"Spat is chastised, Not-Professor Potter," said Spat.

Harry sighed. "My name is Harry – Harry," he said. "How do you know she's coming, anyway?"

Spat gave a loud sniff. "Vanilla, Number Six India Ink, and cat," he said. "Spat shall return with butterbeers and treacle tart for Not-Professor Harry and Miss Hermione Jean Granger."

"You're a right pain... oi, Hermione doesn't like treacle tart!" Harry said, but the house-elf had already popped away.

Spat re-appeared beside the table with two bottles and two plates. "Double portions of treacle tart – enjoy!" he said, and promptly disappeared.

"I know why they assigned you to me, Spat – no one else would have you!" Harry grumbled to the empty room. He heard light rapping on his door and moved to open it.

"I wanted to see you before you met with the Board of Governors," Hermione said. "I wanted you to know that... um..."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Hermione...? You wanted to know what, exactly?" Hermione's expression had gone from concerned to dazed, and Harry didn't understand the reason.

Hermione burbled, "I... that is to say... support, you know? That I support you, and..."

"When are you off to meet with the old toads?" Ron called out from the end of the corridor.

"In a half hour," Harry returned, and then asked more quietly, "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Nothing... nothing! Why would you think something was wrong?" she said.

Ron came up behind her and draped his arm over her shoulder. "It sounds like you're broken, 'Mione. Harry... mate... you might want to slip on a shirt, eh?"

"I'm not broken," Hermione said absently. "Did Professor Detheridge hurt you? You're reddened right there... just below the collarbone... um..."

"I'll be right back," said Harry as he hurried to his bedroom.

He heard Hermione through his door as she said to Ron, "Wait a moment... did you call me 'Mione? My name is Hermione, Ronald, and I'll thank you to never call me that again!"

Harry fished through his wardrobe in search of the proper clothing for an inquisition. As he looked in the mirror and held shirts against himself, it finally sunk in that Hermione had been distracted because he was shirtless. He found himself thinking of Hermione without a shirt – something he'd not consciously contemplated before – and was very quickly as distracted as she had been.

"Did you fall asleep in there? You're going to be late!" Ron shouted. "Ooh, treacle tart... all right if I have some of this?"

"Go for it," Harry called back.

"For the life of me, I can't understand the attraction to treacle; it's ghastly," said Hermione.

Harry heard the scraping of a plate across the table before Ron asked, "How do you think this is going to go? You aren't worried, are you?"

"I suppose I'm not," Harry said. "I can't really change what happens, right? I figure that if I'm sacked, I'll end up training with the Order or something."

"You won't be going alone, then – you know that, don't you?" Ron said. "It might not be until the first of March, but I'll be there."

"Harry's not going anywhere," Hermione said firmly.



"I hope not," said Ron. There was silence for a moment before he added, "Gah! That's the worst tart ever! Where did you get this – from the kitchen leavings?"

Harry finished dressing, opened his bedroom door and shouted, "Spat!"

The house-elf popped into the sitting room. "Not-Professor Harry needs something from Spat?"

"Take those treacle tarts away!" snapped Harry.

Spat looked to the table and then to Ron, who was scraping his tongue with his fingers. He said, "Spat did not bring the tarts for Not-Professor Harry's friend Mr. Weasley."

"Take them and get out!" Harry roared.

"Harry! There's no need to shout at him!" Hermione insisted.

Spat bowed his head slightly. "Miss Hermione Jean Granger is too kind to Spat, despite the foulest of food... Spat is chastised," he said, and disappeared with the plates of treacle tart.

"Those were for me, weren't they?" sighed Hermione.

"I have to go or else I'll be late; that wouldn't be the best idea, would it?" Harry said.

Ron gruffly patted him on the back. "I know it isn't Sunday, but why don't you sit with us for supper, eh? Then you can tell us all about the old goats -"

"Didn't you say that they were old toads?" Hermione chipped in.

Ron wagged his finger at Hermione. "Shush, you!" he said. "Better yet, Harry, we could get in some flying; there's no telling how long this weather will hold out."

"I'll see you later," Harry said. He wondered if they would just show him the door if the meeting went against him, but decided to stay positive.

Hermione waited until Ron disappeared down the short corridor, and then took Harry's face in her hands and kissed him soundly. "You'll be remaining here," she said afterward.

"You can't promise that and neither can I," Harry countered.

"That's true, but I've already planned for that," said Hermione. "My things are packed, everything save Crookshanks. If they're foolish enough to force you out, then I'll be leaving with you. We could go to wherever my parents are. You've enough gold to hire tutors, and I'm sure that the Headmaster would go out of his way to help -"

Harry pulled her into a hug. "It won't come to that," he said.

Hermione laid her head against his shoulder. "You'll find me afterward?" she asked.

He brushed her hair away from his mouth and said, "I promise. You're keyed to the portrait outside, by the way. I thought, er, that you might like somewhere to study other than the common room...? The balcony - or loggia or whatever it's called... it's nice out there, and not as noisy as I would have thought. This room isn't bad either."

"I'd like that," she said. "I suppose you do need to go."

"Wait here if you like. I don't know how long it will be, though," Harry said. "Do you suppose it's better or worse if it goes quickly?"

"Just go, would you?" she said, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He left with a warm feeling inside, with a sense of assurance that no matter what happened he would be all right. It wasn't a familiar feeling, but he liked it all the same.

The Board of Governors meeting was to take place in the anteroom to the Great Hall. Harry arrived ten minutes before it was scheduled to begin, but no one else was there. The normal furniture had been

moved aside and was replaced by a long and massive table. Fifteen places were set with desk blotters, inkpots, quills and fresh parchment. Three of the chairs usually found in the room had been set against one wall. Harry took a seat in one of them and waited; he tried not to fidget.

The Board entered as one, followed by the Headmaster. Dumbledore cast Harry a very formal look, almost of a solemn quality. Harry acknowledged him with a sober nod. He hoped that this was an act, as Dumbledore's upbraiding of him before Lockhart had been. Madam Bones took the seat at the head of the table and the Governors filled in the sides. The opposite end was left for Dumbledore. One side had six places and the other seven; the seventh seat, the one closest to Dumbledore, was left empty.

"Mr. Potter, please take your seat at the table," said Madam Bones. Harry silently walked to the empty place and seated himself.

"By your leave, Madam Chair...?" said Dumbledore.

Madam Bones set her monocle in place and nodded to the man on her right, who took up quill and parchment. "This is the one thousand nine hundred and ninety-ninth meeting of the Board of Governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, operating under the Charter of 996 between the Founders and the Village of Hogsmeade, whose assigns are the Ministry for Magic of Scotland and England and the Irish Magical Republic. Do all present agree that the official meeting taken today, the twelfth of October, nineteen hundred and ninety-six Anno Domini, shall satisfy the terms of the Charter? Signify by saying 'aye'." The man with the quill took note of the acclamation.

"As the first order of business," Madam Bones went on, "the Chair reports that two petitions for public attendance were submitted prior to this meeting, both of which were submitted in the proper form and within the proper time. Neither petitioner, however, possessed standing for attendance. The first petition was received on the twenty-fourth of September from Mr. Gilderoy Lockhart, Esq., whose stated reason for attendance was to provide comment regarding the advisability of Mr. Harry James Potter's in-residence apprenticeship with the Headmaster. Mr. Lockhart was informed by the Secretary

that he would be permitted to submit a letter for attachment to the meeting record if he so desired, and he declined to do so. The second petition was received on the twenty-sixth of September from Mr. Keith MacLeish, whose stated reason for attendance was to appear in support of Mr. Potter. Due to his status as a member of the press, Mr. MacLeish's attendance would be in violation of Board Administrative Rule 3,027. He was so informed by the Secretary, and did submit a letter for attachment. With that, the Secretary will offer introductions by way of recording our attendance. Mr. Secretary...?"

"Persimmons Westerley, a wizard of self-made means and residing in Northumbria, and the appointed Secretary of the Board, is recorded as present," the Secretary said; he stopped to mark the parchment before him.

"Amelia Susan Bones, a witch in the employ of the Ministry for Magic of Scotland and England and residing in Dorset, and the appointed Chair of the Board, is present," Madam Bones said.

A man with thinning hair and a pug nose to Madam Bones' left cleared his throat and said, "Edward Parkinson, a wizard of pure descent and accumulated means and residing in Berkshire, and the appointed Vice-Chair of the Board, shall be marked as present."

To Parkinson's left, an elderly witch wrapped in a grey fur stole smiled kindly at Harry. "I am Eldegard Trestle, young Mr. Potter, and I was well acquainted with your grandmother Elisabeth. After all these years, I believe everyone knows who I am and where I am from and such?"

Westerley took a slow, deep breath. "For the record, Madam Trestle...?" he said.

"Oh, bother," said Trestle. "Eldegard Trestle, a witch of self-made means and retired herbologist residing in Norfolk. As I am sitting here at this very table, would you please mark me as present, Perky?"

Westerley's cheeks burned red. "Madam Trestle... that was my childhood nickname," he said. "Having attained the age of seventy, I would really rather that you call me by my given name...?"

Trestle waved her hand dismissively. "When you attain one hundred, you won't care so much," she said.

A man in dark blue business robes with greying mutton chops shook his head at Trestle. "Llewelyn Ajax... I'm a wizard residing in Carmarthenshire and a stonemason, and I'm present here today," he said.

To his left was a small witch with a large hat. "Gwynn Edevane, a witch in the employ of St. Mungo's Hospital and a resident of Cornwall, is present," she said quietly.

Next to Edevane was a wide-faced man dressed in black robes with an emerald-coloured cap. "Iarlaith Madden's the name," he said; "I'm an enchanter by trade, residing in Cork since 1946. I finished my schooling at Hogwarts in 1937, as a proud member of Hufflepuff House." He looked to Westerley and added, "I'm here, a' course."

The woman seated next to Harry had a long, weathered face and wore leathers beneath her robes. "Wilna Clarsach, witch and Potions Mistress and resident of the Isle of Skye, declares that she is present," she said briskly.

All eyes turned to Harry. Dumbledore reached out and patted his hand; "Why don't you introduce yourself at this time?" the Headmaster said.

Harry cleared his throat and hoped that his voice wouldn't crack. "Er... Harry Potter... wizard and apprentice to the Honourable Albus Dumbledore. I'm residing at Hogwarts right now, but my permanent home is in... Berwickshire...? I'm attending the meeting as a guest," he managed to say.

The Headmaster gave Harry a small smile. "Albus Dumbledore, a wizard and Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, currently residing in Perth and Kinross, is in attendance as an ex-officio member of the Board," he said.

Everything about the man on Dumbledore's left appeared dark. "Lethibridge Mallory, a wizard and collector of antiquities, making his residence in Nottinghamshire, is present," he said.

The rosy cheeked witch to Mallory's left had a smile that left Harry slightly uncomfortable. It occurred to him that he was reminded of Umbridge. "Hester Halloran, a twelfth generation witch and publican residing in Galway, is present," she said with a lilt.

Next came a stern witch in a tartan who struck Harry as a heavier-set version of Professor McGonagall. "Erskine Faraday, a witch and wildcrafter residing in Fife, is present and ready to conduct business," she announced.

The last witch on the Board had long, fiery red hair pulled back into a complicated plait. She appeared younger than the rest of the members, though she was most likely older than Harry's parents would have been. "Melisende McIlvaine, a witch of independent means from Aberdeenshire, is present," she said.

Harry recognised the man to the Secretary's right. "I'm Niall Pucey, and I suspect I'm the next order of business," he said amiably.

"Mr. Pucey is correct," Madam Bones said. "Due to the dismissal of Mr. Malfoy from the Board, we have been left with a vacancy. Six applications were received for the open position. Two were disqualified due to encounters with the law enforcement wing of the Ministry in violation of the Charter. Two withdrew from consideration upon entry of the fifth applicant, Mr. Rutherford Carrows of Wiltshire. As you may be aware from recent editions of the Daily Prophet, Mr. Carrows finds himself under review for possible financial irregularities. This leaves us with the sixth applicant, Mr. Pucey. Speaking in favour of Mr. Pucey will be Mr. Westerley. Speaking in objection will be Madam Halloran. You have the floor, Persimmons."

"Thank you, Madam Chair," Westerley said. "Mr. Pucey completed his Hogwarts education in 1971, having resided in Slytherin House. He is a solicitor and barrister admitted to the magical law societies of Scotland and England, Ireland, France and Iceland, who has worked in independent practice since completion of a three-year clerkship

with former Minister Bagnold. Mr. Pucey is the current chair of the Magical Law Society of Scotland and England, and is the only living solicitor to file suit and win judgment in goblin arbitration against Gringotts Wizarding Bank itself. His youngest son, Adrian, is currently the Hogwarts Head Boy; his eldest, Randall, completed studies in 1992, and his daughter, Estrella, completed in 1993. Mr. Pucey is qualified to fill an established Slytherin seat on the Board, and is possessed of impeccable professional and personal credentials... it wouldn't hurt to have a solicitor at hand, either."

"Reginald Gazump has been good enough for this Board for seventy years," Llewelyn Ajax scoffed. "We've no need of contrary advice, thank you."

"Mr. Westerley has the floor, Mr. Ajax," said Madam Bones.

"Reggie Gazump has forgotten more about the law than he may have known in the first place," Mr. Westerley said. "I deal with him more frequently than the rest of you, and I must say that the man might as well be a portrait for all the value he brings."

"Our representation is not on the current agenda," Madam Bones noted. "Do you have anything more to say as advocate, Mr. Westerley?"

"Mr. Pucey's credentials speak for themselves," said Westerley.

"Madam Halloran, the floor is yours," Madam Bones said.

"Mr. Malfoy was not merely a Slytherin, Madam Chair," Halloran said. "He represented an increasingly put-upon segment of our people: those of long standing. The Malfoys have been figures of stature in the English wizarding community for at least fourteen generations; Madam Malfoy was of the Black family, which was even more established. Families of long standing stir the cauldrons of our economy and society. Mr. Pucey is obviously a man of some accomplishment, but he is only the third Slytherin in his family line and only two generations removed from manual toil. Mr. Carrows was a reasonable replacement for Mr. Malfoy. If the campaign to impugn his name has caused him to withdraw his application, then I must

respectfully recommend that the two applicants who withdrew to his favour should be contacted again. Failing that, the opening should be reposted. We must ensure that all the value that Lucius brought to the board is present in his successor, not merely the superficial qualities.” With that, she sat down.

Harry clenched his hands beneath the table as she spoke, and finally opted to sit on them. Dumbledore was as implacable as ever, but it was obvious that more than one Board member was smouldering. That was enough to hold Harry's hand until he realised that he had been about to prove his instability to the Board.

Madam Bones took note of hands, and said, “Madam Trestle?”

“Thank you, dear,” Madam Trestle said in the way of a friendly grandmother. “I do not think it wise to tiptoe around Mr. Malfoy's criminal behaviour. This Board let itself be run roughshod by that man, and there are persons at this table who were favoured with Galleons.”

“Madam Trestle! This is not a place for wild accusations!” Lethibridge Mallory snapped.

“Mr. Mallory -” Madam Bones began.

“There's no need,” Madam Trestle said; “Let them spout on about the Malfoy virtues, even though they are wasting their breath and our time. I knew Abraxas Malfoy quite well, dearies, and Lucius was not an improvement on his father. This Board does not need to reproduce Mr. Malfoy's sparkling character; that is the last thing needed, in fact. Call the question, Amelia.”

“The question is called,” Madam Bones said before Mallory or Halloran could speak up. “Mr. Pucey, would you please wait outside?”

“Come, Niall; let me share your son's latest exploits,” said Dumbledore; he led Mr. Pucey into the Great Hall.

Madam McIlvaine raised her hand and said quietly, “I request a recorded vote, Madam Chair.”



"A recorded vote is requested," said Madam Bones. "Mr. Westerley, accept the votes, please?"

"Please raise your wands to signify your vote, be it 'aye' or 'nay'," Westerley said. One after the next, the members raised their wands and cast faint glows.

The parchment before the Secretary glowed briefly as well. "Six votes were cast in favour, and five against," he said.

"A majority of the whole is required, Madam Chair," Parkinson said.

"That's true, Madam Chair," said Westerley.

"In addition to breaking ties, I am allowed a vote when a vote of the whole is required, Eddie," Madam Bones said. She raised her wand and cast a green light. "My vote is 'aye'."

Westerley wrote on the parchment for a moment, and then said, "With seven votes in favour, Mr. Pucey is appointed to the Board pursuant to the Charter."

Mr. Pucey was brought back to the room and took an oath supervised by Madam Bones and Dumbledore. Madam Bones allowed some polite banter for a few minutes and then announced, "We do have a full agenda, and there are several unexpected budget items. We shall move to the second item on the agenda, which regards our guest. Under the terms of Mr. Potter's dismissal as a regular student, the Board authorised Headmaster Dumbledore to use the full means of Hogwarts to find a suitable alternative for Mr. Potter's continued education. The Headmaster subsequently offered Mr. Potter an in-residence apprenticeship for a period of not less than two years and not more than three years. As Mr. Ajax has strenuously argued, it was the intention of the Board to see Mr. Potter removed from Hogwarts facilities on the grounds that his presence might pose a risk to the safety of other students. Therefore, by initiation of Mr. Ajax and Madam Clarsach, the Board shall review Mr. Potter's educational performance since the first of September as well as his scholastic disciplinary record. Professor?"

“Madam Chair, that is not exactly what I had in mind,” Ajax said. “I intend for the Board to consider all of Mr. Potter's activities since the Board issued his dismissal, whether those activities occurred at Hogwarts or otherwise. His actions and behaviour reflect upon this institution.”

“Only Mr. Potter's actions in his capacity as an apprentice are relevant,” Madam Edevane said. “Who speaks in favour of Mr. Potter?”

“I must recuse from the debate and any subsequent votes, due to my fiduciary responsibility to Mr. Potter,” Madam Bones said. “It goes without saying that I support his continued residence at Hogwarts.”

Mr. Parkinson nodded in formal fashion. “Thank you for your disclosure, Madam Chair. In that event, I shall govern the proceedings. Is there a speaker who has familiarity with Mr. Potter, other than the Headmaster? You will of course be given the opportunity to comment prior to any judgment, Professor... no one...?”

“If no one wishes to speak as an advocate, then each member in turn receives the opportunity to make comment,” the Secretary said.

“I am aware of the rules, Westerley,” Mr. Parkinson said snappishly. “Madam Trestle, you have the floor.”

“He's a powerful young man, Mr. Potter is,” said Madam Trestle. “I, for one, would rather have him here at Hogwarts than elsewhere. We know that You-Know-Who is afraid of the Professor, and it stands to reason that he's probably unnerved by Mr. Potter as well. Who else has gotten the better of that monster so many times? Should we keep a watchful eye on him? Perhaps. Should we eject him from the premises? Certainly not!”

“It's precisely that power that endangers Hogwarts,” countered Mr. Ajax. “Frankly, even without the issue of uncontrolled magic and behaviour, I think that the boy endangers this school. Yes, the Dark Lord is interested in him. Why, pray tell, would that keep him away? More likely, it will draw him here. He has to go, and none too soon.”

Madam Edevane said, "This is a waste of our time and efforts. Mr. Potter is the Headmaster's apprentice. We empowered the Headmaster to find a solution for Mr. Potter's education, and he did so. Mr. Potter has done no harm to Hogwarts. May I remind my colleagues that we were the ones who approved Gilderoy Lockhart's hiring as a Defence professor at this institution? May I also remind my colleagues that Mr. Lockhart was a failure and an embarrassment? The man even now acknowledges his crimes; it is merely his long-term stay at St. Mungo's that stilled the hand of law enforcement. I fail to see how Mr. Potter's behaviour toward Mr. Lockhart was anything more than the rashness of youth, coupled with the abominable actions of a man who should have known better."

"Gwynn's said it for me," Mr. Madden told everyone.

Madam Clarsach peered down her nose at Harry for a few moments before she spoke. "I am largely in agreement with Mr. Ajax. However, I do believe we have an obligation to assure that alternate arrangements for Mr. Potter are appropriate and safe. We should acknowledge that he is at some risk of harm, and act accordingly."

Dumbledore steepled his fingers beneath his chin. "My feelings on this matter should be abundantly clear to all," he said.

"You put your foot in it, Dumbledore," Mr. Mallory said with a scowl. "You knew very well that this decision on your part flouted the will of the Board. It's unfortunate that Mr. Potter will pay for your transgression, but the Wizengamot decided he's to be treated as a man... so I say to Mr. Potter: best wishes and thank you for your service to Hogwarts. I don't believe he should be here on the morrow."

Madam Halloran gave a thin lipped smile to Harry. "I do believe you mean well, boy, and you certainly did our world a service sixteen years ago – however unwittingly. Nonetheless... once a rule breaker, always a rule breaker. I'm a publican by trade; as such, I bear not a little affection for rogues. There's no room for it in a school, however. It's enough that you've run roughshod in your staff selections this year, Headmaster – but this? If you want to master Mr. Potter, then I

suggest you resign your post and take your apprentice to somewhere more appropriate for the task.”

“Half of the people in this room are cowards, and half are dark – some very near to the point of evil,” said Madam Faraday. “Unfortunately, it's for the most part the same half.”

“Madam, you will keep a civil tongue!” Mr. Parkinson huffed.

“Which half are you, Eddie?” she demanded. “Let's not mess about, fellow members. Mr. Potter and the Headmaster stand between us and the ruin of our world. Even those of you who support that monster's aims should know that your lives won't be worth a tinker's damn in the end -”

“Madam Faraday!” shouted Mr. Parkinson. “No one at this table rises in support of You-Know-Who!”

“Of course not,” Madam Faraday returned; “Why rise when one can pass Galleons under the table?”

Mr. Parkinson leapt to his feet. “That's quite enough!”

Madam Bones said, “I quite agree. Are you finished, Erskine?” Madam Faraday replied with a harsh nod.

“Mr. Potter should remain here, where the school may benefit from his skills, the students may benefit from his leadership, and the community may find reassurance in his presence and continued training,” said Madam McIlvaine.

“This is... enlightening,” Mr. Pucey said. “I don't have anything to add just now.”

“Nor do I,” said Mr. Westerley.

“The motion on the agenda is to order Headmaster Dumbledore to remove his apprentice, Harry James Potter, from the buildings and grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry effective

immediately,” said Mr. Parkinson. “I call for a recorded vote, with the members identified by vote in the public record.”

“Please raise your wands to signify your acceptance of Mr. Parkinson's call for a recorded vote with the members identified by vote in the public record, be it 'aye' or 'nay',” Westerley said. Again wands were raised and again the parchment glowed. Six were in favour and five against.

“Please raise your wands to signify your vote on the following: that Headmaster Dumbledore be ordered to remove his apprentice, Harry James Potter, from the buildings and grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry effective immediately,” Westerley said. Five wands quickly lit green and five red glows joined them.

Mr. Pucey raised his wand, and said, “I have a larger stake in this than many of you. My son is the Head Boy, as you all know. Knowing that this was to be on the agenda, I sought his opinion on this matter. Adrian has a keen eye for the truth of any matter, both on the surface and beneath. I trust his judgment.” His wand lit red, and he added, “I, for one, expect that we shan't be revisiting this unless there's a very good reason...?”

“Ajax, Clarsach, Halloran, Mallory and Parkinson vote 'aye'; Edevane, Madden, McIlvaine, Pucey, Trestle and Westerley vote 'nay',” Mr. Westerley reported; “The motion has failed.”

Shortly after that Harry was ushered out of the room. Madam Bones and those who voted in favour of Harry all shook his hand; he was clapped on the shoulder and hugged by Madam Trestle and trapped into sitting for photographs with Madam Faraday and Mr. Madden. Madam Halloran and Madam Clarsach engaged in pleasantries with him as well, and even Mr. Parkinson gave him a friendly handshake and said that he was just fulfilling his responsibilities. Neither Mr. Mallory nor Mr. Ajax bothered with pretence; they clearly wanted nothing to do with him.

Mr. Pucey caught Harry at the door. “Mr. Potter,” he whispered, “Adrian can take care of himself, of course... but he's taking some risks that give me pause. I think he's in the right to take control of his

House, but still... This may seem odd to you, but I wonder if you might keep an eye on him? I'm not asking you to befriend him or cross house boundaries or anything of that sort, but I would sleep better at night knowing that someone without an agenda was watching his back."

"I'm an apprentice, Mr. Pucey; there aren't any house boundaries for me," Harry said. "I don't know him well, but Adrian seems a good sort."

"I wish he'd keep his head down, but he's an ambitious young man," said Mr. Pucey.

"There's nothing wrong with that," Harry said. "Besides, if a Slytherin's willing to play fair on the Quidditch pitch then I have to stick up for him – it's only right."

Mr. Pucey grinned for a moment, and then noticeably straightened. "The Potter family has embodied its reputation for courage and honour in its dealings with my family across the generations. The House of Pucey will never stand against you," he said in very formal fashion.

Harry wasn't certain what to say and settled for inclining his head in a slight bow, which Mr. Pucey returned. He resolved to enquire with Ted Tonks about Mr. Pucey's reputation. A Slytherin ally would hardly be a bad thing, he figured, but the last remarks made him wonder if the man was simply paying off some sort of debt by voting in his favour.

\* \* \* \* \*

October 19, 1996

"It's an interesting place to hold a meeting," Harry said to Dumbledore as they neared the Whomping Willow.

"The Shrieking Shack has the advantage of its reputation," Dumbledore said. "Of course, we've enhanced that somewhat; I am

not averse to releasing the occasional frightening sound or an apparent spectre.”

Harry laughed. “I suppose the Shrieking Shack does have to shriek now and again,” he said.

“Quite so,” said Dumbledore. “I take it that you can disable the Willow? I am afraid that I do not move as fast as was once the case.”

Harry rolled beneath the flailing limbs and struck the proper knot. Dumbledore shuffled to the concealed entrance and followed Harry into the tunnel that led to the Shack.

“This seems... cleaner,” Harry observed.

“All the better for we aged sorts to make the journey,” Dumbledore returned. “I am also grateful to the Weasleys for all the changes that they made to the interior. Not only is the Shack an acceptable place to meet, but also to house persons who may prefer to remain unseen.” He leaned heavily on his walking stick for a moment, and then added, “This is a greater distance than I had recalled.”

“Should we stop for a bit?” asked Harry.

“Only for a moment,” Dumbledore answered; “We must not keep the others waiting.”

They were met at the entrance to the Shack by Lupin; Shona Malloch stood behind him. Lupin strode forward and pulled Harry into a fierce hug. “You did your best for Heather – you did your absolute best,” he said unevenly.

Shona traded places with him. “At least yeh popped that bastard,” she said.

“It wasn’t enough,” Harry said firmly. “How is she? Is she at all better...?”

“You have some people to meet,” Lupin cut in, his voice still shaking. “Would it be all right if we were to talk afterward?”

"Of course... that is, if the Headmaster agrees?" Harry returned.

"The portion of the meeting that concerns you will last a very short time," said Dumbledore; "I would take it as a favour if you were to remain with Remus and Miss Malloch." Lupin nodded warmly, but there was no warmth in his eyes - nor was there anger, Harry thought. His eyes were deadened, and that left Harry with an unsteady feeling.

Dumbledore led Harry into the room where his birthday party had begun; it seemed much longer than two-and-a-half months since that night. There were fourteen chairs in a circle, and two remained unfilled. Most of the dozen people who waited were sitting quietly. When they entered, all conversation ceased.

"I had not thought that a time would come when we would all gather again," Dumbledore said into the silence, "yet here we are – all save one. It is time to meet the reason we are assembled. This is Harry Potter."

Covelli gave a small wave; she still seemed tired from whatever had happened to her in the classroom, but otherwise unharmed. Detheridge and Flitwick were present, as were Croaker, Marchbanks and the Marquis.

A man who appeared close in age to Croaker and Marchbanks stood slowly. "I am Tiberius Ogden, young man. I knew your great-great grandfather Roger, as well as your grandfather Alexander from his days on the Wizengamot. Never became closely acquainted with Zebulon... he was a testy fellow. In any case..."

Ogden moved forward and took Harry's hand; Harry was so shocked that he didn't react. He peered closely at the scar on the back of Harry's hand. "I was informed of this, Mr. Potter. Shocking business, that is. I knew Madam Umbridge would be nothing but trouble, and my suspicions were borne out." He released Harry's hand and then shook it. "It is a pleasure to meet you. There's a fair bit of Roger in your features."

"You may not remember me," said the next man; "I am John Bear."



"Of course I remember you, sir," Harry said immediately. Bear had made a strong impression upon him at MacLeish's gathering. "I still hope that the Headmaster will let me visit your school," he added.

"I hope that will come to pass," said Bear.

"One never knows, Harry," was all Dumbledore would say.

"I may need your assistance in solving a mystery that affects my kinsmen," Bear said. "It pertains to tribal lands – some hunting grounds and a ritual site. Would you be willing to lend your aid?"

"Er... I can't imagine how I would help, but I'll try," said Harry.

"Good man, Mr. Potter," Bear said. "We will talk more, I'm sure."

Dumbledore stepped forward and introduced the man seated next to Bear. "This is David Narrandarrie," he said; "He was one of the people whom you contacted as a prospective tutor."

"Oh, you're the expert on dreamtime!" Harry said.

Narrandarrie was a short man, not so much as Flitwick but several inches shorter than Harry. He had dark weathered skin that crinkled deeply around his eyes when he smiled. "No one is truly an expert," he said in a high, soft voice. "I have lived with the dreamtime all of my life, even in the times when dreams were unwelcome things. That which you would ask of me is a difficult path to walk. I will help you find the path in the springtime, and you will decide whether to walk upon it."

"Er... yes, sir," Harry said. He reached to shake Narrandarrie's hand, but instead received a peculiar bow.

"Some of Master David's words are spoken for effect," the next man in the circle said to Harry. "Take the ideas seriously, young Potter, but the man himself should not be taken in the same way." He rose and performed a crisp bow. "I am Kanzan Yasutsana."

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "I thought you said you hadn't warned off the people I contacted for tutoring," he said. "You said that Mr. Yasutsana was very hard to reach, didn't you?"

"I did say that Kanzan is booked years in advance," Dumbledore confirmed.

"My old friend is most persuasive," Yasutsana said with a toothy grin. "I had hoped that we would not see another dragon rise, but it was not to be... and so we in turn rise again from the ashes."

There was a woman to Yasutsana's left. Harry couldn't guess her age; she could have been anywhere between forty and one hundred, he decided. She had flaming red hair that was streaked here and there with white. It fell to the small of her back. She was about Harry's height and wore unusual robes that had no sleeves. Her arms were considerably more muscular than Harry's own. "I am Telma Sigurdsdottir," she said. "I will teach you to wage war." With that, she sat down.

The last man who Harry didn't know seemed very unassuming in contrast to the others. He wore a black robe and a black shirt with grey trousers beneath. It wasn't until the man shook his hand that Harry noticed that the man's unusual shirt collar.

"My name is Oscar Pomfrey, Harry," he said. There was something oddly calming about the man's voice. "Yes, I'm a relation of Poppy – her brother, to be precise."

"You're dressed like a vicar, aren't you?" said Harry.

"That would be because I am a vicar," Pomfrey said with a chuckle. "I was ordained in 1953, and led parishes for forty years. These days I'm merely the rector for the Chapel of Saint Columba; it's a chapel-of-ease located about ten miles from here. Nearly all of my congregants are Muggle-born wizards, actually."

"Forty-three years of stuff and nonsense, Reverend – it's an amazement to me," said Croaker.

“And after all this time, you can’t simply leave it alone, Algie?” Ogden growled.

Pomfrey gently shook his head. “Mr. Croaker refers to me as the Reverend Pomfrey. He means it as a term of derision, but I’m honestly not bothered by it – it’s accurate, after all.”

Dumbledore held up his hands. “If we could put aside the bickering for the moment, gentlemen...? You all know that I would not have brought us together casually. Even as the severity of the war with Voldemort grew in the 1970s, I did not call upon some of you.”

“You would not bring us together merely to help instruct your apprentice,” Yatsusana said. “It is clear that Mr. Potter is to play a role in Voldemort’s demise.”

“It is more than that,” said Dumbledore. “Harry, may I have your permission to share Madam Trelawney’s information?”

Harry gave a shrug. “I can’t imagine anyone who helped to defeat Grindelwald would betray us. Besides, it’s almost for certain that Voldemort has all of it now.”

“That’s not exactly true, Mr. Potter,” Bear said. “There is one not among us, and it’s no accident – is it, Albus?”

“It is true that I do not believe Vladimir can be trusted,” Dumbledore admitted.

“...and well you shouldn’t, Albus. It’s almost certain he’s tried to kill more than one of us over the years,” Marchbanks said with her customary bellow.

“Merciful Merlin, Griselda!” said Ogden. “I understand that hearing charms have improved a good deal; perhaps you should try a new one!”

“Now then, to the reason we are gathered:” Dumbledore cut in. He spoke the entire prophecy and the room went quiet.

“Your birthday is at the end of July?” Bear asked Harry.

“July the thirty-first,” Harry replied.

“Clearly your parents must have defied this wizard thrice?” confirmed Yatsusana.

Harry said, “So did Neville Longbottom’s parents, but –”

Sigursdottir finished, “– but you bear the mark. It is a rune of strength set against evil.”

The Marquis broke another period of silence. “I was one hundred and forty-three years of age on the day I killed Trampuso. Albus, he was more than one hundred years of age when we faced Grindelwald. Lucia, she was perhaps twenty in those days? The Darkening nearly broke her – and I do not say this to offend, dear girl. I retreated from the living for fifteen years after Trampuso.” He looked to Harry. “Monsieur Potter, you will not yet be twenty when you face this Voldemort, and you are the one to do the killing. This is not the burden for one so young. This is why I fell to the madness and let Albus bring me to his Hogwarts, yes? Albus needed the twelve. There are thirteen here, Monsieur Potter, and your own will come to you in time. We do not come together... ehh... casually. We are old, most of us, but we will do what we are able.” He rose to his feet, embraced Harry, and kissed him on each cheek. “We will do what we must.”

“Well spoken, Alex,” boomed Marchbanks. “It’s good to see that you can still rise to the occasion.”

The Marquis raised his head imperiously. “I assure you, Madam that the Marquis de Maupassant can always rise to the occasion,” he declared.

“I have no expectation that all of you will remain until the fateful day comes, not even those who are now teaching at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said. “I do hope that even if you cannot bring yourselves to assist me, you will nonetheless choose to assist Harry when and how you are able.”

“You would not have asked and we would not have come if it were not so,” said Narrandarrie.

Sigurdsdottir stood from her chair. “We will fight. It is our way,” she said. Within moments, it was clear to Harry that Dumbledore’s team would help as they could.

“So, Professor...” Harry said mischievously to Dumbledore, “if my mum and dad and the rest from the first war with Voldemort were the ‘old crowd’, then what’s this group?”

Dumbledore pulled a wry grin and said, “This would be the old-old crowd, I imagine. Why don’t you go to Remus now?”

After a round of handshakes and solemn promises, Harry left the room to look for Lupin. He found him, along with Shona, in the open area at the foot of the stairs.

“Are they going to stand with you?” Lupin asked.

“It looks that way,” said Harry. “How is Heather doing?”

“Yeh cut right to it, don’t yeh?” Shona said. “She’s forgotten so much, she... och, you tell it, Remus.” Her eyes squeezed shut and she let out odd hiccups; Harry realized that she was trying not to cry.

Lupin’s expression went cold. “Lockhart didn’t direct the obliviation in the way that should have been done. It’s a wonder that those musicians weren’t affected as badly, but I suppose Heather was spelled first. She hasn’t only forgotten the events of that evening; she’s forgotten a fair portion of the past several years. There are bits and pieces there, but each time she tries to recall it... each time it’s the same: she descends into the same sort of madness. St. Mungo’s certainly didn’t serve her well.” Harry felt a rush of seething anger from Lupin; he quickly took the steps to clear his mind.

“That effin’ place... and what sort o’ saint is Mungo – can yeh tell me that?” Shona snapped. “They knew that magic was no good fer Heather, but did that stop ‘em? No! One of those healers of yours, she was tired of listening ta Heather screaming, so she tried ta put

her out with a wand. It took three days ta settle Heather again, and that healer's lucky ta be in one piece."

"Heather's mind magics lashed out, and she had absolutely no control," Lupin explained. "They were ready to turn her over to the Department of Mysteries, Harry – I firmly believe that. As soon as she was calmed enough, we spirited her away."

"Where is she then...?" Harry asked. "She's here, isn't she?"

Harry started toward the stairs, but Lupin stopped him. "Harry, it took her two days to recall who Shona was. I can't imagine she'll remember you at all. She... she's taken to calling me her d-dad, and that would never have happened..."

"If yeh want ta see her, yeh'll have ta leave yer wand with Remus," Shona said. "I don't want yeh looking in her eyes fer long, neither – is that understood?"

"I understand," Harry said. He drew his wand and placed it in Lupin's hand.

"Are yeh sure yeh want ta do this?" Shona asked him gravely.

"I have to see her," said Harry.

Shona pointed down the small corridor that started beside the stairs. "Second door on yer left," she said.

Harry knocked on the door. "Er... may I come in?" he said.

"It's open," said a voice from the other side. It didn't sound like Heather's voice, he thought; there was something hollow about it.

Heather sat on her bed in night clothes, with her arms gathered around her knees. Her hair was neatly brushed but seemed dull. There were dark circles beneath her haunted eyes. She looked to him with a too-quick movement and studied him intently. "I don't know you... but I know you," she said.

"I'm... I'm Harry," he said.

"I'm Heather," she said.

"I know that," he returned.

She laughed softly and said, "I suppose you do. Mum and Dad talked of someone named Harry, so you must be him. That must be what I remember... but I remember more than that. I do know you, but I can't put it together..."

"Don't try to remember," Harry told her. "I'm, er, something like a cousin, I suppose. Remus was a good friend of my dad and mum, almost a brother. He would have taken me in when they died if it had been allowed."

"So you could have been my brother," she said. "I like that idea: a brother. I wonder what it's like to have a brother? You don't have one, do you?"

"That's right," he said; "How would you know that?"

Heather rolled her eyes. "You said that Dad would have taken you in. If you had a brother, you'd have said that he would have taken the both of you in. I'm not stupid; I just can't remember anything to save my life." She patted the edge of the bed and added, "You can sit, if you'd like. I don't bite... not much, anyway."

Harry laughed. "That sounds like the Heather I know," he said.

One corner of her mouth curled upward. "Really? That's good, then."

"Have they told you what happened?" he asked.

Heather's eyes drifted away from Harry. "They told me about magic, if that's what you mean," she said. "I'm supposed to know that I've forgotten things, but I'm supposed to try not to remember them – how mad is that?"

"It sounds mad, doesn't it?" Harry agreed. "Was it hard for you, being at St. Mungo's?"

Her hands twitched. "I don't want to talk about that place," she snapped.

"Then we won't talk about it," Harry said. "Where are you going to go? Has anyone said anything about that? You aren't staying here, are you?"

"No, we're not staying here. That's a good thing; it's a drab place, don't you think? I don't know where we're going. I don't think my mum and dad know, either," she said. "Do you like my mum and dad? I know you said you might have lived with Dad, but that doesn't mean you like them?"

"Yeah, I like them," he said. "Shona's... interesting."

"That's a nice way of putting it," she chuckled. "I remember her a little, but it's from a long time ago. I... I don't remember Dad at all, really. He really seems to care about me – I guess that's enough, right?"

"He does care about you," Harry said.

"They seem lost, don't you think. I know I'm more than a little lost... I guess we'll all be lost together," she said. "I think they want to leave the country, but Mum owns a restaurant and Dad is worried about his work or something like that."

"You'd be safer outside Britain, I think," he said.

"I got the sense we're in some sort of danger," said Heather. "Is it that man who did this to me? Do they think he'll come after me again?"

Harry hesitated and then said, "It's something like that."

"It's all frightening, really," she admitted. "Should I be frightened?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've... I've been worried about you, you know? All I knew was that you had been hurt; I didn't know how badly."



I didn't know if you remembered anything at all, if you were just lying in a bed somewhere..."

"It's not that bad, not as long as I keep from thinking too much about what happened," she told him.

Harry was struck by an idea, an idea that just seemed right to him. "Do you like the countryside?" he asked.

"The countryside? Fields, trees, gardens, that sort of thing?" she asked in return.

"Right in one – do you remember that sort of thing?" he wondered.

"I remember things like that, yeah. I like the countryside all right," she said.

"I can take you somewhere, all three of you. It's a bit isolated; there are only two other people there, and two house-elves," he said. "Do you know what house-elves are?"

"Are those the little green men, the ones who fall all over themselves trying to be helpful?" she asked. "I saw them once or twice at... at that place."

"Those were house-elves," Harry confirmed. "There aren't any people your age; is that a problem?"

"Harry, I don't remember anyone but Mum, not really. I think I might recall you, but I'm not sure of it. I'll be fine wherever we go," Heather said. "Is there a nice house there – nicer than this, at least?"

"Oh, yes," Harry said with a smile; "No worries there."

"Why don't you call for Mum and Dad? We can see what they have to say on it," Heather said.

Remus and Shona came when called. Shona gave a small smile when she entered the room. "Yeh look better than this mornin', Heather; it's good to see," she said.

“Harry’s had an idea,” Heather said.

“I have somewhere for you to stay, somewhere safe,” Harry told them.

“Harry... that’s very kind of you, but we’ll work it out somehow,” said Lupin.

“I’ve the restaurant ta think of,” Shona added.

“What it is worth – the restaurant, I mean,” Harry asked.

Shona’s eyes narrowed. “What’s it worth...? Och, yeh’d better not be thinkin’ what I think yer thinkin’.”

Harry pressed, “It can’t be worth more than a million pounds, can it?”

Shona broke into coughing, and Lupin frowned; “I understand what you’re doing, but you must know how I feel about charity,” he said.

Harry sighed. “Do you understand? Do you, really? Look, I’m partly responsible for this. I didn’t wave the wand, but you know what I mean, Remus.”

“You’re hardly responsible for this, Harry,” Lupin snapped; “I think we’re all quite clear on who the responsible party is.”

Harry turned to Heather. “I never meant to hurt you. I’m going to make this right.”

“Remus said yeh’ve got a lot of money, but yeh need ta think of yer future, boy,” Shona said.

“Please, Remus... let me take the three of you there. If you don’t like it, I’ll bring you back and we can figure out something else,” Harry said. “Shona, if you decide to leave the country, then I’m going to buy L’Oiseau Chanteur. You can help me find a new chef if you like, or recommend someone, or I can just give the place over to The Greek – whatever you think is best. I want to do this. I need to do this.”

Shona let out a long breath. "I don't like it, but it can't hurt ta look. Remus... what do yeh think?"

"All right, Harry," Remus said; "I'll give in that much, at least. How do you plan for us to get there? I can't imagine Albus will let you be away for long, if at all."

"I'm going to try something," Harry said. He turned to Heather and added, "Don't be afraid, all right? I promise that nothing will hurt you."

"I believe you; I don't know why, but I do," she said.

Harry called out, "Fawkes? Could you come here, please?" He had no idea what would happen, if anything. A few seconds later, the brilliant red phoenix appeared at the centre of the room in a blazing flash.

"Lord in Heaven above... what is it...?" Shona whispered.

Heather scooted backward until she was pressed against the headboard. Fawkes landed on the end of the bed and slowly walked forward. "It won't hurt me?" she asked in a small voice.

"He won't hurt you," Harry assured her. "Fawkes is a phoenix."

"A phoenix... he's named after another animal?" she asked.

"No, it's not Fox; it's Fawkes, like Guy Fawkes," Harry said.

"He's named after someone who wanted to blow up Parliament, eh? I guess I have to like you," Heather said.

Fawkes cocked his head to one side and closely regarded her. Without warning, he flapped his wings once and landed atop Heather's knees.

"OH!" she shrieked.

Fawkes responded with a long, high trill.

“Oh... oh, my!” Heather said to Fawkes. “You sing! I used to sing, Mum says, but... but I can’t remember how to do it. I mean, I can still carry a tune, but she says I did a bit more than that. I remember being on stages, and street corners when I was really young, but I can’t hear it in my head.”

Fawkes trilled again; the pitch rose and then fell.

“Fawkes, could you take us somewhere? I know that it’s probably up to the Headmaster, but I thought that I would ask you first,” Harry said.

Fawkes let out something that was more chirp than trill, and hopped from Heather’s knees to Harry’s shoulder.

“I believe your answer is ‘yes’, Harry,” Lupin said with a smile.

Harry said, “Listen carefully, right? Brucewood is a manor house that sits on twelve hundred acres of gardens and forest on the west-central coast of Victoria Island in British Columbia.”

Lupin blinked hard twice. “Brucewood... didn’t that belong to your grandmother’s family? I’m sure that I remember James speaking of it, or perhaps it was your grandfather...?”

“That’s right,” Harry said.

“British Columbia? That’s in Canada, right?” Heather said.

“How do you remember that, but not...?” asked Lupin.

“It’s like amnesia, they told us,” Shona said.

“You can’t remember that it’s amnesia?” Heather asked, and then started to laugh.

Fawkes squeezed his talons and Harry jumped. “I think he’s ready to go,” Harry said. “Shall we do this in one trip or two, Fawkes?” Fawkes tugged Harry toward Heather.

“I’d say that’s two trips, wouldn’t you?” Lupin laughed.

Harry motioned for Heather to stand. He said, "All right, wrap your arms around me – tightly – and then close your eyes. I promise that it'll be all right." She held him tight but it was awkward; it felt nothing like before, Harry thought. In an instant, they were bathed in warmth and hurtled through darkness. By the time Heather drew a sharp breath, they stood at the edge of Brucewood's wards. He allowed Heather to pass through, and they walked through the trees until the gardens and the house came into view.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Will you look at that? It's unbelievable..."

"Do you think you'd be able to stay here? It might be a long time, Heather – a year or more," Harry said.

She looked at him in disbelief. "Are you joking? Oh yes, this will do! I can't wait to see the house."

Harry returned with Remus and Shona a short time later, and they were eventually won over by Heather's enthusiasm and the Grangers' welcoming tone. Mr. and Mrs. Granger seemed genuinely happy to have company, however extended, and both Dobby and Winky were eager to have more people to serve. The wards and the Fidelius charm didn't seem to have any negative effect on Heather, and Harry was glad for that. He took a small package from the Grangers for Hermione and then returned with Shona to the Shrieking Shack. Harry promised to invite Ted Tonks the next day to see about the restaurant, and Shona resolved to begin making arrangements for leaving St. Ebb.

Dumbledore and his old colleagues were still in the upper room, talking and laughing and apparently making plans. Harry was welcomed back into the room. "You borrowed Fawkes, I understand?" the Headmaster said.

"I've made arrangements for Remus and Shona and Heather," Harry said.

Dumbledore's brow rose. "Is that so? Will they be leaving the country?"

“Yes, and I can’t say anything more,” said Harry.

“You cannot or will not?” Dumbledore asked.

“I can’t say,” Harry confirmed.

“An inspired choice,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Do you require any assistance?”

“I’ll have to see Mr. Tonks tomorrow – will that be a problem?” Harry asked.

“I would imagine it is a matter of estate management,” Dumbledore answered. “Will you require anything else?”

“I have a question, actually,” Harry said. “How would I go about hiring a healer?”

“You would like to hire the exclusive services of a healer to treat Miss Magruder?” Dumbledore asked. Harry nodded.

Dumbledore clapped his hands to gather the attention of the others in the room. “Mr. Potter has need of a healer – no, no, not for himself. He wishes to hire a healer exclusively to care for a friend who was given a faulty obliviation.”

“This would be the young girl in the Daily Prophet?” Flitwick asked.

“That is correct. I can imagine that the term of employment might be twelve months or more,” said Dumbledore.

“That will be most expensive,” Yatsusana said.

“Where would this take place?” asked Bear.

“I... can’t say,” Harry returned.

“Can you say on which continent?” Bear countered.

“North America,” Harry said.

“I’ll have some names for you by the end of next week,” Bear told him. Harry’s shoulders lowered noticeably and he let out a long breath.

Dumbledore let his hand rest on Harry’s shoulder. “Why don’t you return to the castle, Harry?” he said. “Marcus will walk with me when I return.”

Harry nodded, even as his shoulders fell further. He wandered down the stairs and then out the stable doors to the ward-concealed patio that the Weasleys had left behind. Hogsmeade was busy, as it was an open weekend for the students. He thought he saw Dean and Seamus strolling down the high street. He didn’t see any distinctive red hair. He hoped that Hermione had stayed in the castle, perhaps even in his rooms. It was a hard thing for him to admit to himself –a very unaccustomed thing – but he needed her just then.

\* \* \* \* \*

End notes:

1. Yes, I know this chapter is abso-bloody-lutely LONG. I felt that all these elements fit together, so here they are. Despite the length and depth, this does advance the plot significantly; it also brings together people and events that otherwise would have been spread over several chapters. They will get shorter as I go... I think... either that, or my hands will fall off... :-)

2. Anna de Flandres' name is a tip of the hat to Jeconais, whose Queen of the Veelas in the incomplete fic "Princess" went by the same name. This Anna de Flanders is not a Veela, however stunning or self-possessed she may be.

Achille de Flanders is not a tip of the hat to Orson Scott Card. I made it through about 1/3 of Ender's Game before I decided I wasn't hooked, and that's the extent of my experience with the author. I was informed of the similarity, and decided to keep the name as-is. I happen to like it.

3. The incompetent minor dark wizard Uberwald gets his name from a longtime reader... not to say that the 'real' Uberwald is an incompetent dark wizard, of course. Insofar as I know, he is neither a wizard nor dark.

4. The American Grindelwald sympathizer Joshua Warren gets his name from another longtime reader... not to say that Josh is a suck-up to a mad Austrian wizard, of course. Insofar as I know, Josh is not acquainted with any mad Austrian wizards.



## Chapter Forty

### LES CHEVALIERS DE SAINT-PIERRE

November 11, 1996

“Ron, take your feet off the table,” Harry said idly.

Ron snorted, “Are you turning into my Mum?”

Harry looked up from the thick tome he was poring through. “Only if you keep your feet on the table,” he said.

“Crikey, you’re an irritable one!” Ron protested. “See? My feet are flat on the floor – are you happy now?”

“It’s not my furniture,” Harry explained.

“That’s what a good cleaning charm is for, Harry,” Ron sighed; “Are you going Muggle on me?”

Neville slammed his book closed in disgust. “If Detheridge asks for a spell, wouldn’t you think it would be in one of the books he’s referenced?” he fumed.

Harry set aside his book and capped his inkpot. “I’m picking up a fair bit from him,” he said to Neville; “What’s the spell?”

“Detheridge said that there’s a healing spell specially crafted for scratches and small cuts, but I can’t find anything other than Episkey,” Neville complained.

“He must mean ConsanESCO,” Harry said immediately.

Ron put down his Muggle Studies text. “Consa...huh? What’s this about?” he asked.

Harry went to the table in the corner of the informal study hall that his sitting room had somehow become. “Budge over, Finnigan,” he said.

"A fellow might think you own the place, Potter," Seamus laughed.

Harry pulled up his sleeve and set his forearm on the tabletop. "Now, Consanescio feels a bit twitchy," he explained. "The tip of your wand actually needs to touch the cut, because it's not a wide area spell like Episkey."

Neville, Ron, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, Katie Bell, Terry Boot, Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan all crowded around as Harry ran his wand along his arm and silently cast a spell that left behind a shallow cut. Most of them winced as blood welled up.

Harry told them calmly, "It's a different sort of grip... Watch what I'm doing, right? Consanescio."

"I've, er... never seen a wand held like a quill before," Susan managed to say.

Parvati was less affected by the sight; she said, "You hold your wand that way for cosmetic spells used around the eyes."

"I've never used any eye glamours," Susan said.

"Are you thinking of colour charms for the eyelids, Parvati?" Lavender explained. "You know, this is probably the best way to hold a wand for any sort of fine work..."

"Two points to Lavender," Harry muttered as he closed the last portion of the cut on his arm.

"I can't see where the cut was, not a trace of it," said Ron.

"That's the idea," Harry said. "I can't see how it would be useful in a fight, but it does keep scars from forming... takes a bit out of you, though." He flexed his wand hand gingerly.

"Brilliant... consanescio... Thanks, Harry," Terry said.

“You’ve still got it, mate,” said Seamus; “So when are you taking over the Duelling Club?”

“Taking it over? No thank you – I’m happy to leave it to Tonks and Bill,” Harry said.

“I like Tonks well enough, but she isn’t half the teacher that you are,” Katie countered, just as the door from the corridor opened hard.

Hermione stomped inside and threw her book bag to the floor in disgust. “Tonks is twice the teacher that Professor Croaker is – he’s a horrible man!” she fumed.

Ron gaped at her. “You threw your books!”

“You’re not taking Runes this year; why do you have Professor Croaker?” asked Terry.

“Professor Dumbledore assigned me to him as part of my independent tuition. This fellow Ogden that’s working with Croaker, he’s little better. Between the two of them... it was simply awful. I left early,” Hermione said. “I can’t believe I did that, but I couldn’t take another moment!”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “What did Croaker do?”

Hermione exploded. “He dismissed two months’ work – two months! – and said that I could have saved myself the trouble if I’d known the first thing about wizardry. He foisted a children’s book on me, of all things, and he had the nerve – the unmitigated nerve! – to tell me that this book presented the basis for scientific enquiry! That man couldn’t find the scientific method with a point-me spell if he thinks that silly book has anything whatever to do with science!”

“What book was it?” Neville asked.

Hermione’s nose wrinkled. “It was called Pursilla Pepper and the Persnickety Pygmy Puff,” she snapped.

“Of course,” Susan said matter-of-factly; “I should have guessed as much.”

“I hate to say this, Hermione, but the Professor did have something of a point,” Ernie told her. “I admit that it’s childish, but the point of the book is to teach science.”

“You see magic at work, you find a pattern in what you see, you create an incantation, and then you keep casting until the incantation matches up with the pattern – even I know that,” explained Ron. “That’s how science works: you see the magic at work and then bind it into a spell.”

“But... but... what if the spell’s incorrect?” Hermione huffed.

Ron looked at her blankly. “If it works, then how could it be wrong?” he asked.

“That’s not science – that’s... that’s tinkering!” she insisted. “It’s no different than what your dad did in his shed, Ron!”

“It certainly is science!” Ron fired back. “Just because Dad’s the only one who wants to apply it to Muggle things doesn’t change things!”

“Science is about finding the universal from the particular,” Ernie said calmly. “That’s rather basic knowledge for wizards... well, the ones who make it to Hogwarts, at least. I take it that Muggles have a different view?”

“So if you and Ron and Harry and Neville hang your brooms by the handle, then all teenaged wizards hang their brooms by the handle?” Hermione asked Ernie.

“Of course they do – how else would you hang a broom?” Ernie scoffed.

“If all the cauldrons in the Potions classroom are black, then all cauldrons are black?” Hermione pressed on.

“You’d have to look around a bit more, of course,” said Ernie.

“How much more?” Hermione demanded.

Ernie rolled his eyes. “Apply some common sense, Hermione; you’re making this far too complicated.”

Hermione clenched her jaw and took sharp breaths before she asked Terry, “Help me! You have to know about the scientific method...?”

“I’m not exactly a scientist, you know?” Terry said. “Sure, I was raised in a mostly Muggle household and I attended a day school, but science was mostly about weather and toads – at least that’s how I remember it.”

“Do you know what deductive logic is? Hypothesis testing...?” Hermione asked with not a little desperation.

“Oh! Now I understand your point,” Terry said. “Wizards do induce things, don’t they? Hmm... that explains quite a lot; I hadn’t thought on it before. That’s why there are no actual theories of magic...”

“Of course there are theories of magic; there are laws of magic, as well!” Ron said. “You’re all wet, the both of you!”

“The laws of magic explain what appears to work and what doesn’t work. There’s not a hint of why that’s the case, just a handful of observations,” Hermione countered. “The theories of magic aren’t theories; they’re schools of thought. That’s philosophy, not science.”

Ron’s neck reddened. “So it’s the entire wizarding world that’s wrong? I’m glad to see you’re not full of yourself!”

Ernie held up his hands in a peaceful gesture. “Come now, we’re splitting hairs here – it’s nothing to fight over.”

Hermione advanced on Ron. “The fact that you’re all wet, Ronald, says nothing about wizards in America or Japan or anywhere else,” she returned. “You’re making another false assumption – but that’s hardly a surprise.”

Ron shot up from the sofa and made for the door. "I don't need this right now, thank you very much," he snapped.

"Ron, wait!" Lavender said. She collected both of their sets of books and dashed after him.

"Well... that's it for study period," Neville said. "It's off to classes, or dinner, or what have you..."

"That's right – move along, nothin' to see here, mind the gap," said Seamus with a small smirk. "Thanks for the spell, Harry. Hermione... um... here's to better days...?"

In short order, everyone left Harry's chambers save Hermione and himself.

"That bad, was it?" Harry asked.

"Croaker actually despises me," Hermione huffed. "I was so close to hexing him, Harry. I can't understand why Professor Dumbledore would assign me to that... that... ooooh!"

Harry couldn't hold back a rueful chuckle. "So, you've been ordered to work with someone who can't stand the sight of you? Welcome to my fifth year. Would you like me to speak with him – Dumbledore, I mean?"

"It's my problem to resolve," she said sharply; "It's not as if Professor Dumbledore will be swayed. He seems to think that this is for my own good."

"Croaker's making you start from the beginning, then?" Harry asked.

"He may as well; he found fault with the underpinnings," said Hermione. "He did call out two legitimate errors in my calculations, but the rest... he's wrong, Harry. I have a hypothesis for what happened in 1981 and it can be tested. Croaker wants me to give him a rationale for the test by induction, but that's just nonsense and it's not as if he'll accept the results anyway. What Croaker calls science is just an excuse for him to control enquiry. If that's how the

Department of Mysteries works, it's no wonder that there hasn't been any legitimate advancement in the understanding of magic since the seventeenth century. Who knows what knowledge they're hiding down there?"

"Erm... that sounds a touch... um...?" Harry started.

"I sound paranoid, don't I?" admitted Hermione. "It's difficult to stay clear of it, honestly. I can't understand how wizards as influential as Croaker and Ogden can actually believe this nonsense!"

Harry gave a shrug. "Look, I don't understand half of what you're going on about –"

"I don't claim to be a Muggle scientist," Hermione said, "but these are basic concepts."

"Even if I can't follow this theory business," Harry went on, "the solution seems rather simple. Keep on with what you're doing and just write up what Croaker wants, right?"

"But that dishonest... isn't it?" she stammered.

"What's the problem? You're certain he's wrong?" he asked.

"It will take much longer to do things his way, and he's much more likely to be wrong in the end," she said.

Harry gave her a challenging look. "What are you going to do, then – try to change his mind?"

"It would be the proper thing to do," she returned.

"Will it work out?" he asked.

She sighed and said, "Doubtful, isn't it?"

"It's not as if this would be your first go at breaking the rules for the right reasons," he pointed out.

"I suppose it wouldn't. You don't care for Croaker, either," she observed.

He said, "I don't trust him. There's something off about him, but he isn't dodgy like Detheridge." After a pause, he added, "I think he's dangerous. Take care around him."

"Dangerous? Harry, that might be a stretch, don't you think?" she said. "He's an old man who's set in his ways... irritating as anything, but dangerous?"

"I know my hunches aren't always spot on, but there's something about him," said Harry.

Hermione looked to her book bag. "Oh, I do hope I didn't break an ink bottle! I can't believe I threw my books... would it be all right if I did some revising?"

"I have some papers to mark for Detheridge, anyway," Harry said. "Are you coming to Duelling Club?"

"I don't know..." she hesitated. "Professor Detheridge is still wary of me practicing. At any rate, I'm beginning to wonder if I have an aptitude for it."

"What? That's mad – of course you can do it. You've had great marks, and not just on the theory," insisted Harry. "I'd prefer it if you'd come... I'd rather you kept it up, that's all."

She nodded and then went to fetch her books.

\* \* \* \* \*

November 15, 1996

Croaker looked up from Harry's work with a scowl. "You need to stop thinking and start memorizing, Mr. Potter."

"Stop thinking...?"



"You're trying to problem-solve without a thorough understanding of the rigor behind the calculations and design – quite like your little friend Granger in that respect," Croaker said disparagingly.

It was hard for Harry to keep from rising to Croaker's near-constant baiting. "That's Miss Granger," he said.

"Yes... well... Miss Granger seems to think that arithmetic and spell calculations are one and the same. Only a Muggle-born would spout such stuff and nonsense."

"You say that like arithmetic is a waste of time," said Harry.

"Not at all, Mr. Potter, not at all," Croaker returned. "I have more than a passing understanding of Muggle maths. If I wish to know how high I might construct an unsupported wall, then I'll turn to my maths. If I wish to know why the wall must be a certain length and thickness in order to sustain wards, then Muggle maths won't do. I imagine it requires extensive maths for a Muggle to fly, but the most elegant calculus cannot explain the simple levitation of a feather from desk to ceiling.

"The girl is modestly clever and rather diligent but hopelessly naïve. She wasn't offering a novel idea, you know? Modern wizarding has been around for a thousand years; I assure you that others have tried to apply Muggle mathematics in order to answer the great magical questions." He made a mark on Harry's paper with his quill and added off-handed, "I expected you would rise to her defence several days ago. Surely she ran to you in the throes of adolescent angst?"

Harry's shoulders tensed. "I don't like your tone," he said.

Croaker made another mark on Harry's paper, this time in red ink. "How unfortunate for you," he said as he scribbled a lengthy note in red letters, and then added, "She's not a genius, you know?"

"Pardon?"

Croaker didn't bother to look up. "I said that she's not a genius. Granger's strength is persistence - she's a plodder, a grind. The rest

is the product of what I must admit is a superior memory. There's little originality in her work; it is pedantic, derivative, and often mere recitation. That makes for brilliant performance on controlled examinations, but does not translate into brilliant witchcraft. She will only be as great as the writers and theoreticians from whom she borrows. She simply hasn't the gift for it, which is typical for those of her heritage."

"She told me you didn't like her – that's rather obvious, isn't it?" Harry accused.

"I do not dislike the girl per se, Mr. Potter; her problem is that she doesn't understand her place in the order of things," said Croaker.

"Her 'place in the order of things'? What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Harry.

Croaker wiped his face with his hand in frustration and shook his head sadly as though Harry was a small child asking a foolish question. "Muggle-borns are critical to the wizarding world," he said; "Without them, the bloodlines would stagnate and our world would be gone within a few generations. Some pureblood lines deny that truth, and it is to their peril. Even with controlled infusions from muggle-borns, too many of the lines have crossed too frequently. Many hundreds of years ago, this was clearly understood. Salazar Slytherin is often accused of believing that Muggle-borns should not have a place in the wizarding world. That is inaccurate. Slytherin advocated that Muggle-borns be brought into the wizarding world and raised with their birthright, rather than allowing eleven years of confusion and the creation of bonds in a world where they simply did not belong. That was common practice in the days of the Founders, even though the other Founders cast Slytherin out over a related argument.

"Raising Muggle-borns in the wizarding world, together with the application of suitable marriage laws, kept the wizarding heritage fresh and strong for more than three hundred years. It was also better for the Muggle-borns themselves: they had a better understanding of wizardry, and advanced much farther than is the case today. It was the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff descendants who put it asunder. The Wrights and the Molyngtons were your forebears, and they were part

of the movement that changed the old ways. They were wrong; worse, they were hypocrites. The primary role for Muggle-borns is to strengthen wizarding bloodlines through intermarriage - which should, in my view, be planned and coordinated - and to make modest contributions to wizarding that do not excessively disrupt the established order of things."

Harry gaped at Croaker for quite a while, unable to find the right words; he finally blurted out, "You're joking, right?"

"Certainly not," said Croaker; "We live in a world predicated upon the absolute need for secrecy. Such a world cannot tolerate sudden and uncontrolled change – there is no place for such risks."

"So you're saying that Hermione is actually right, but you're just standing in her way?" Harry asked.

"Oh, no, no - her work is misdirected," Croaker replied. "I am discouraging her stridency, as it will gain her nothing. There are limitations to what she can achieve in our world. I do not say that out of smugness or hatred or anything other than a clear-headed observation of how the wizarding world functions. The truth is that your own status as the son of a Muggle-born will only be circumvented because of your relative wealth, the prominence of your paternal line, and the cache that will come from defeating Voldemort - which you will do, make no mistake. We cannot allow it to be otherwise."

"I don't have to listen to this -" Harry started.

Croaker cut him off, "I told Albus fifteen years ago that it was foolishness to have you raised in the Muggle world. You're proving my point famously... or... is it that you have more than a child's fancy for your little Muggle-born friend?"

"I'd take Hermione over ten Malfoys any time, Croaker," growled Harry.

"That's Professor Croaker, Mr. Potter, and in that we agree. Not only does the Malfoy line infuse their magical practices with malice that

borders on evil, but they have also failed to recognize the risk of continual inbreeding. The Potters, on the other hand, have faithfully sought Muggle-born wives for the primary heirs every three to four generations since the days of Bowman Wright. Do you see why I think your ancestors hypocrites? They fought to abolish the old ways and then continued to follow them for more than six hundred years. Your father was the most recent participant in the tradition, but only two generations after your great-grandfather's marriage. This is why you should not consider a Muggle-born for any other role in your household beyond that of a concubine. It poses an unacceptable risk to the strength of your lineage," Croaker instructed him. "I suspect that if you seek it out, you'll find that your father - or perhaps your grandfather - made suitable arrangements for you. It wouldn't surprise me if you were betrothed in the olden form."

"There are no betrothals - that's what the goblin's records say, and I wouldn't go through with one anyway," Harry said.

"If it was done in the olden form, in the way of the marriage laws, then you would have little choice," Croaker explained. "The old betrothals were a vow that transcended generations; they were made under pain of magic itself. I wouldn't trust the goblins on this one, young man; they always have an agenda of their own. They would care little if you lost your magic, if as a result they gained what they sought. It is also possible that your father broke a betrothal in order to marry your mother - had you considered that? If so, then that obligation may extend to you. In any case, a thorough search for a betrothal might right your thinking on this. I can think of four young ladies approximately your age who have not crossed the Potter lineage for several generations; in fact, it would be the same four I've recommended to Neville and Augusta -"

Harry started, "Laws like you're talking about are gone, and good riddance to them. Besides, my mum would have found a way to break any arrangements -"

Croaker cut him off once more. "And how would you know that? Perhaps your mother was made to understand the proper role of a Muggle-born - even for one as brilliant as her reputation suggested? If she understood the potential implications of two consecutive

intermarriages, then she might have welcomed such an arrangement on your behalf."

"This isn't why I'm here," Harry fumed; "You've no business teaching; you're worse than Snape." The books on Croaker's shelves began to rattle.

Croaker said calmly, "Albus assigned Miss Granger to me for a reason, Mr. Potter. He did so because he knows his own weaknesses. I do not share Albus's fascination with Muggles, nor do we agree on the role of Muggle-borns. He does know, however, that there are both social and natural limits on just how far a Muggle-born can progress in this society. Perhaps that's why you are here as well?"

"You might be right about England; you can't speak for the rest of the world," Harry countered.

"That is true, after a fashion... I can, however, cite a list of wizarding communities who failed to keep a balance and subsequently failed. If you're thinking of our friends across the pond, then I ask you to check back in a few decades. America is an experiment, just as is Australia; both are the products of rebels and felons who railed against Mother England. The Americans haven't even managed a unified government. After three centuries, they're nothing more than a loose collection of four factions who barely tolerate one another. Like other such experiments throughout wizarding history, they will fail - allow them enough time to show their true colours," Croaker said with certainty.

"So, let's just sit back and enjoy the ride, eh? Let's hold the Muggle-borns in their place. Long live the purebloods! Is that it?" Harry snapped.

"That's not what I said -" Croaker started.

Harry stood angrily. "Why don't you just put on a mask and say 'mudblood' instead of Muggle-born?" he spat.

Croaker swept his quill, Harry's paper and most of the items of his desk onto the floor with an angry swat. The shelves shook violently

and a number of books fell to the floor. He stood, shaking, with his palms pressed against the cleared desk top and said coldly, "I - am - nothing - like - those - vile – creatures. You will never accuse me of that again, is that understood?"

Harry was shaken but stood his ground. "You're a bigot, and I'm through with you; Hermione should be through with you as well. I thought you were no better than Snape, but it's worse than that. You're no better than my Uncle Vernon. That's my fat, lazy, good-for-nothing, bigoted, prejudiced Uncle Vernon – the Muggle," he said; the air crackled with his anger.

"Do you know what the Department of Mysteries is, Mr. Potter? Do you honestly know?" Croaker asked.

"No, and what does that have to do with anything?" Harry shot back.

"Of course you don't, and that's my point. Some things shouldn't be meddled with. Muggle-borns often disregard that to their detriment. Consider that before you decide that I've set out to harm your little friend. I'm doing quite the opposite, but you're too young and impetuous to see that," said Croaker.

The temperature in the room dropped sharply. "I'm not stupid, Croaker. You're saying that the Ministry will hold things back for its own interests – that it'll quash anyone to protect itself and its friends. I've already learnt that lesson, but thanks for the warning," Harry said. His breath condensed in the sudden cold.

"I can play parlour tricks as well, Mr. Potter. Put away your magic before you hurt yourself," said Croaker. The sconces on the walls flamed high, and the temperature in the room soared.

"You're dangerous, Croaker. I knew you were dangerous - I've told people so, and I was right from the start. I won't take back what I said: you may as well be a Death Eater!" Harry shouted at him.

Croaker closed his eyes and took a long, slow breath. "You misunderstand me," he said at last, "and you are clearly incapable of putting aside your petty biases in order to see the truth of things. Get

out, Mr. Potter. Get out, and do not darken my door until you are prepared to face reality. When you do decide to return, I expect to see either betrothal papers or evidence that they do not exist. If nothing else, I will see that you shed some of the naiveté you share with Miss Granger."

Harry turned toward the door. "Leave her out of this, Croaker - it's between you and me," he said as he grasped the handle.

"How I conduct independent tuition with my assigned student is my business," Croaker said as Harry stepped through the doorway. "Granger will know the truth of things before I've finished with her... you have my word on that."

Harry's neck twitched and he felt as if he was on fire. He turned slowly; Croaker's wand was drawn but not raised. It felt to Harry as if he was trying to force flames from his mouth, but he managed to say thickly, "If you ever hurt her - if you ever hurt any of my friends..." His right hand came across in a slashing motion. Croaker's desk separated into a mass of tiny bits that collapsed and spread across the floor of the office.

Croaker visibly flinched, but then slowly tucked away his wand. He and Harry cursed each other with their eyes for several long seconds. At last, the old wizard - the former Unspeakable - said with Snape-like silkiness, "The qualities of your magic are unlike mine, unlike Albus... I'm reminded of Grindelwald, but your magic is purer... it is hotter. Then again, much of Grindelwald's power came from a decade's worth of dark rituals. My former colleagues are most interested in how you came to be, in how you survived, in how you retained any magic at all, and not merely because of your potential to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Despite what Albus thinks, it would be best for everyone if Miss Granger were never to find the answer to that particular mystery."

Harry said nothing; he turned and left. Croaker's voice trailed him into the corridor - it was too quiet for anyone else to make out but somehow felt as if it was slicing into Harry's head:

"Oh, Mr. Potter...? My obligations to Albus demand that I tell you this: Never perform wandless magic of that calibre in the presence of an active member of the Department of Mysteries. If you do, then Voldemort or no Voldemort, you'll never again see the light of day."

I'll show him, Harry thought, and Hermione will show him, too. The remarks about marriage contracts weighed on him, and he resolved to set Ted Tonks onto the matter. He looked forward to shoving Mr. Tonks' reply down Croaker's throat.

\* \* \* \* \*

## LIGHTNING ATTACKS BY YOU-KNOW-WHO's MEN!

In an hour-long spree reminiscent of You-Know-Who's darkest days, six families were attacked in a swath that ran from Winchester to Dover. Independent observers reported the Dark Mark above at least four of the six residences. Unidentified sources within the Department for Magical Law Enforcement report that the Unforgivables and other highly destructive curses were used in abundance. At least nine persons lost their lives, and no fewer than twenty persons were received at St. Mungo's Hospital. The same DMLE sources told this reporter that one Auror was amongst the dead and that two additional DMLE officers were amongst those taken to hospital.

Speaking at Minister Fudge's behest, Ministry official Percy Weasley said that neither You-Know-Who nor his associates have been confirmed as the attackers. "The Ministry for Magic will not tolerate acts of this kind, no matter who may be responsible," Weasley said. "Minister Fudge has asked Director Bones and the DMLE to pursue all available information so that the perpetrators of these dastardly acts may be apprehended and put to justice." Minister Fudge was unavailable for further comment. The names of the deceased and wounded have not yet been made available.

- The Daily Prophet, November 16

\* \* \* \* \*

November 20, 1996



Tonks gritted her teeth, and then shouted, "Stop... stop... OI! WANDS DOWN!"

Bill started, "The silent casting is coming along, but on the whole your accuracy –"

"THAT WAS THE MOST PATHETIC DISPLAY I'VE EVER SEEN! IF YOU WERE AURORS, YOU'D BE SENT PACKING! I WAS WONDERING FOR A MO' IF ANY OF YOU LOT HAD EVER SEEN A WAND BEFORE!" Tonks screeched.

Bill said with a shrug, "I don't know if it was quite that bad..."

Harry crossed his arms and leant against the wall. He said, "Ernie, you looked like you were half-asleep out there. Justin, you should have easily disarmed him. Susan, Hannah... embarrassing. Harper, Collins, Stanley, Townshend... with aim like that, I wonder if I should check the corridor to see if anyone's stunned. I want all four of you back to working on your aim. All of you... mind what you're doing! If you don't want to be here, then shove off!"

"Harry... we're just sparring..." Ernie said tentatively.

"There's no such thing as sparring anymore – people are dying out there. Do you want to be next?" Harry snapped.

"All right, you lot," Bill cut in; "It's swordsmanship for the next hour, so let's clear the floor now... that's it. The toughest thing about wand wielding in a duel is to keep the body calm and the senses sharp all at once. It'll come – just be patient. Harry, help me set up?"

As the students collected their things, Bill opened a supply cupboard and pulled Harry just behind the door where neither could be seen. "Are you and Tonks trying to scare them all away?" Bill whispered forcefully.

"This is serious business," objected Harry; "You've seen the Prophet – it's starting."

Bill shook his head. "This is student practice," he said; "Most of these kids are here to raise their marks in Defence, or so they can tell their mum and dad that they sparred with Harry Potter –"

"That's a fine reason for them to be here, isn't it?" Harry growled.

Bill shook his head and said, "They're students – that's exactly why they should be here. These aren't soldiers... they aren't even your study group from last year."

"Tonks gets it," Harry said.

"Tonks is just Tonks," Bill laughed, and then added as an aside, "Besides, it's that time of the month."

"Keep it up, Weasley, and it'll be time for you to beg!" Tonks growled from the other side of the room.

"Tetchy, isn't she?" Harry muttered.

"I heard that, Potter; the next time we spar, your arse is mine," Tonks snarled, still twenty paces away.

Bill levitated the rack of swords free of the cupboard and placed it against the wall. He gave his wand a complicated wave and the soft mats on the floor were replaced by hardwood, and then said sweetly, "I'll see you later, Tonks – let the victims in, would you?"

As the students filed in, Bill's demeanour changed. It was obvious from the start that Bill took the swordsmanship group much more seriously than the ordinary duelling club meetings, and certainly this session would be no exception. The students lined up against the far wall without being prompted.

Bill waited for a minute or more after the last student entered, and then waved the door closed. "Present yourselves for the roll," he said. "Abbott, Hannah..."

"Present, Master-at-Arms," Hannah returned quickly.

“Betancourt, Elston.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” said the seventh year Slytherin; he was apparently Adrian Pucey’s closest friend and a quiet sort.

“Bones, Susan.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms.”

“Bruce, Holly.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms...”

Bill stopped and snapped, “That was tentative, Miss Bruce – again.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms!”

“Better... Cadwallader, Robert.”

Rob Cadwallader was a seventh year Ravenclaw of whom both Flitwick and Detheridge spoke highly. “Present, Master-at-Arms,” he snapped off.

“Entwhistle, Kevin.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” the seventh year Hufflepuff said.

“Finch-Fletchley, Justin.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Finch-Fletchley said. Justin had been a dab hand with a foil from the start, having been trained in fencing from an early age.

“Goldstein, Anthony.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Anthony said blandly.

“Goyle, Gregory.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms, sir,” Goyle said. His voice was as harsh and thick as always, but Harry couldn’t deny there was something quite different about Goyle’s manner this year; his performance in History of Magic was only one indication. He wasn’t pretty with a blade, but made up for it with sheer force.

“Greengrass, Daphne.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” said Daphne. As always, she was dressed differently than the rest: rather than her school uniform, she wore tightly cuffed trousers, a shirt that was tight at the collar and loose in the sleeves, and short flat-heeled boots.

“Longbottom, Neville.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms.”

“Malfoy... Draco,” Bill said with an edge to his voice.

“I am here and prepared to duel, Master Weasley,” Malfoy said lazily. The response was an acceptable but archaic form; Malfoy was, of course, keenly aware of that. He stood comfortably and with grace, however grudgingly Harry had to admit it.

“McDougal, Morag.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” she said; after a pregnant pause, she inclined her head toward Malfoy and added, “Is the pretentious prick allowed to answer that way, sir?”

“McDougal –” Malfoy started.

“You will address your peers in the proper form, Miss McDougal,” snapped Bill.

“My apologies, Master-At-Arms; I was referring to Mr. Prick,” McDougal said without missing a beat.

“Noted... and do put it to rest,” Bill said evenly. Malfoy bristled but said nothing as the roll continued with, “Pucey, Adrian.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” said Pucey, with a respectful bow of his head.

“Weasley, Ginevra.”

As with all the previous sessions, Ginny flared red at her formal name – though it was now mostly confined to her neck. “Present, Master-at-Arms,” she said with slightly clenched teeth. Harry didn't have much sympathy for her, though; she had been the one to wheedle her way into what was supposed to be an upper-form-only group, having appealed all the way to the Headmaster.

“Weasley, Ronald.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Ron said. Harry had wondered how Ron would fare with his brother as instructor, even in an unofficial capacity; it had gone much better thus far than he would have expected.

“Zabini, Blaise.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” the sixth year Slytherin said smoothly. Like Finch-Fletchley and Malfoy, Zabini had been raised with a blade in hand.

“Potter, Harry.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Harry said. Bill insisted on the same formalities from Harry, and Harry had agreed immediately; if he was to be a participant as well as an assistant, Harry figured that he needed to show the others that he was willing to follow the rules.

Bill gave them all a quiet and cool appraisal before he observed, “There are fewer of you than at our last meeting. We began with fifty-one, and now we're down to seventeen plus Mr. Potter.”

He paced the room as he continued, “This is a demanding art. At Durmstrang, swordsmanship has been part of the duelling curriculum since the school's founding. All students are required to duel, but

none can advance to sixth year Duelling Arts without achieving excellence with a blade. By seventh year, only twelve students remain in their duelling program, and all of these participate on the Junior European circuit. Beauxbatons has similar requirements, and also advances twelve students to the circuit. Hogwarts hasn't offered formal duelling instruction for sixty years, and since then only three students have qualified for the junior circuit. Of those, two were admitted to participate." Harry noticed the briefest flash of anger cross Bill's face, and wondered if perhaps he had been the third student.

"So you're trying to get us on the circuit?" Malfoy asked.

"Any Hogwarts student of age who wants to join the circuit should have that chance," said Bill. "After... some debate... the Headmaster has agreed to allow a twelve-member Duelling Team, styled the same as Beauxbatons. Professor Flitwick and the Marquis de Maupassant will sponsor the team. Professor Flitwick will evaluate your skill with the wand, and the Marquis and his assistant will conduct the swordsmanship evaluations." He paused to let the students settle, and then added, "Professor Flitwick was, of course, a four-time European champion in wand duelling as well as the World Champion twice in the 1930s. What you may not know is that the Marquis won ten consecutive European duelling championships with the sword as well as three World championships, and six European and two World championships in mixed duelling."

"I wonder when... the Stone Age...?" Pucey muttered.

"You're only allowed four European championships and two Worlds; after that, they retire you," said Zabini; "How could the Marquis have won that many times?"

"The limit was ten and three until 1834, and six and two until 1855. I think you can guess why the limits were changed," Bill said.

"So it was in the Stone Age," Pucey chuckled.

"The Marquis has probably forgotten more about duelling than you lot will ever know," Bill returned; "The man's a hundred years older than

Dumbledore, and he beat me nine times out of ten last month. It would have been ten of ten if he hadn't been toying with me."

"Do you think there'll be a circuit at all next year, with everything that's happening?" Cadwallader asked.

"The schedule is set, and we'll be training toward the certification matches in May. There's no way of knowing for certain, of course," Bill said. "Any other questions?"

Malfoy crossed his arms and asked, "What about Potter?"

"As a member of the staff, Harry can't qualify for juniors," Bill said.

"I won't have time for competitions," Harry added.

Justin gave his rapier a quick swish, and said, "Twelve spots for seventeen, then? I'm game for it."

Bill gave a curt nod and said, "The Marquis will be here to observe this session two weeks from today. I do not expect to be embarrassed." He clapped his hands sharply and added, "Take your positions!"

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## COWARDLY ATTACKS CONTINUE

For the third time in ten days, wizarding families were attacked in the dead of night. This time, the terrorists struck in four different locations spread from Inverness to Bristol. The Dark Mark was spotted above all four attacks. Five deaths have been reported, with eleven persons received at St. Mungo's Hospital. Amongst the dead was one Auror, according to unidentified Department of Magical Law Enforcement sources; this brings the ten-day toll to four Aurors, or nearly seven percent of the currently active force.

In an unscheduled appearance on the Wizarding Wireless Network, Minister Fudge urged the Wizengamot to approve an immediate increase in funding for the DMLE. Later in the same broadcast,

former Minister Millicent Bagnold observed that even with increased funding, there would be no significant impact on the number of available Aurors until 1999. Three Auror candidates are currently in training, according to the Ministry's Office of Information; two will be available for service in 1997, and the third in 1998.

The Ministry may have to rely on outside sources to bolster its forces should these attacks continue, according to Dark Forces Defence League associate director and spokeswizard Gilderoy Lockhart. "The League is prepared to stand in substitute for Ministry security services at Hogsmeade, the Ministry, St. Mungo's and other public sites, just as we have done at Diagon Alley. Ministry security professionals would then be available to support the Auror force in defending the British citizenry against these cowardly attacks," Mr. Lockhart said.

DMLE Director Amelia Bones asks that any citizens with information regarding these attacks or the wizards responsible for them please contact the Ministry as soon as possible; information will be received in confidence. With regard to Mr. Lockhart's comments, Director Bones said, "It is regrettable that eight consecutive years of funding cuts for the Auror Corps have left us in this position. We will of course consider offers of support from any qualified and legitimate sources." Minister Fudge was unavailable for comment due to a previously scheduled trade meeting with Bulgarian and Albanian officials, according to the Office of the Minister.

- The Daily Prophet, December 8

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December 10, 1996

"Lemon sherbet?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry hesitated and then gave a shrug. "Why not?" he said.

Dumbledore's eyes lit; "Truly?" he asked.



"Come to think of it, I've never actually seen you take one... they aren't from Fred and George, are they?" Harry wondered.

"Certainly not!" Dumbledore laughed. "Honestly, I do partake of them. Shall we both make a go of it?"

Harry took the round golden sherbet from Dumbledore and let it sit in his mouth for a while. "Not bad," he decided.

The Headmaster smiled broadly. He said, "Unlike many of our fellows, I am not particularly fond of chocolate, or anything powerfully sweet for that matter. Algernon favours crystallised pineapple – can you imagine?"

"I can imagine a lot with Croaker," Harry said flatly.

"And thusly we commence our business," said Dumbledore. "I had intended to bring up the matter of Professor Croaker, had you not first done so. I await your version of events."

"My version? Here it is in one: he's a right bastard," Harry said.

"Harry! I won't have such language, and certainly not with respect to colleagues!" Dumbledore chided him.

"You weren't there. The things he said..." Harry returned.

"The Professor seems to believe that he was offering a reasoned view on the way of things in wizarding Britain. He also allowed that his views on Miss Granger were presented, views which differ from my own," said Dumbledore.

"As far as he's concerned, Hermione is just... I don't even know what the right words are... breeding stock, I suppose? The only reason I'm a real wizard is because my family was wealthy," Harry said; "Everything's about blood with him."

"That doesn't make Professor Croaker a Death Eater – we've discussed this before with regard to others," Dumbledore pointed out.

"I suppose not, but people like him make it easier for Death Eaters to get what they want," Harry protested.

"I imagine the Professor would argue that by making his own views clear, he helps provide those who believe in pureblood ideals with the opportunity to be something other than Death Eaters," Dumbledore countered.

Harry shook his head and said, "You shouldn't make excuses for him. I'll say the same to you as I said to him: he's a bigot, plain and simple."

"He says as plainly that you are ignorant and that Miss Granger is misguided, and that the both of you are arrogant," said Dumbledore.

"He's done with me, and I'm done with him. Hermione should be done with him, as well," Harry fired back.

Dumbledore let out a pained sigh. "Algie presents the scientific take on the prevailing pureblood sentiments -" he began.

"It's not science. Hermione can tell you what science really is, and what she says matches up with what I know," Harry cut him off.

"Ah, but you are not referring to wizarding science," said Dumbledore; "Wizarding science is by necessity different than the science practiced by today's Muggles. I imagine it bears more in common with Muggle science from many hundreds of years ago, when maths and measurement and such things lacked precision and when the view of the physical universe was phenomenological rather than rational."

"I don't pretend to understand that; most of this is like sitting through an hour with Binns, honestly," Harry admitted, "but if what you're saying is right... then how do we ever really know anything?"

Dumbledore let loose a bit of the eye twinkling that grated on Harry, and responded, "That is a question asked by wizard and Muggle alike since time immemorial, albeit in different ways and under differing circumstances. It is a question with no certain answer."

"If that's true, then why are you putting Hermione through this?" Harry asked.

The Headmaster gave a small smile. "I do like that you jump to your friend's defence, Harry, I truly do. Nonetheless, Miss Granger needs to learn how to interact with people who do not share her views, and even with those who reject her views entirely. This is a critical tool for accomplishing that which she so strongly – even desperately – wishes to accomplish. Without learning this, any achievements that she might make will be despite herself."

"Sometimes you have to take a stand, though. Some things are right and some things are wrong," Harry argued.

"Oh, quite right – quite right," Dumbledore agreed at first. "Good and evil, right and wrong: these are manifest truths. I ask you, however, when should one take a stand? In what way should one take a stand? Is the purpose of taking a stand to encourage change, or simply to be correct? Can one effect real and lasting change without first understanding the true state of things and the reasons why that state came to be? Can one effect real and lasting change without the involvement of those who are to be changed, or at the very least some measure of agreement that change should occur? Good and evil are real; right and wrong are real; and very few people, very few situations are unequivocally one or the other. It is wrong to kill, Harry... except in defence of self or others, of course. It is wrong to steal... but what if that theft robs an evildoer of a weapon to wield?"

"It sounds like there aren't any standards at all," said Harry.

"That is certainly not the case," Dumbledore assured him. "Some standards of behaviour are eminently sensible, and most of the world's peoples agree upon them. Do not kill or steal except in the defence of others. Respect one's parents and elders. Keep one's oaths, both to self and to others. Engage in charity for its own sake. Avoid envy and jealousy. Leave things better than you find them. Love one another. Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. Honestly, this is not as complicated as philosophers would from time to time have us believe."

“Those things aren't always easy,” Harry said.

“We must do what is right rather than what is easy... but I know that I've already shared that bit of wisdom with you. You're a good person, Harry, and your actions are generally well meaning. Miss Granger has her own life lessons to master, and she possesses the intelligence and goodness of heart to muddle along. Look after her if you wish, but don't fret just yet. Have another lemon sherbet,” said the Headmaster.

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## MURDER MOST FOUL!

### Bagman's body found on Knockturn Alley

Ludovic “Ludo” Bagman, former head of the Ministry's Department for Games and Sports, was found dead last evening on Knockturn Alley. Reluctant witnesses from the vicinity of the Alley described Mr. Bagman's body as 'slashed', 'hacked' and 'a right mess'. One anonymous observer commented that the injuries looked to be from a blade rather than from spell fire. The DMLE offered no further information at this time, citing the need to protect information as an investigation is mounted.

Mr. Bagman, aged 46, was a notable figure in the world of Quidditch in the 1970s and early 1980s. He was the best-known – and most notorious – player for the Wimbourne Wasps during their League-winning campaigns of 1977 and 1980. He also captained the English side at the 1982 World Cup.

Mr. Bagman left his Ministry headship last year under a cloud of allegations that he had placed wagers on League matches and other Ministry-regulated sporting events. The strongest allegations centred on the 1994 Quidditch World Cup final, during which he was believed to have incurred large losses to a goblin gambling syndicate. When asked for comment, a senior Gringotts official bared his teeth and soundly shut an office door in this reporter's face. Darker activities were alleged over the years. Mr. Bagman was accused of having involvement with You-Know-Who's cause in the early 1980s, and

those rumours rose again in the wake of You-Know-Who's re-emergence. However, no charges were ever brought.

Mr. Bagman leaves behind a string of jilted women, numerous creditors, and his crup, Bennie.

[Picture 1 – caption] Mr. Bagman and his Wimbourne mates, at the 1980 League final

[Picture 2 – caption] A pale and paunchy Bagman, seen at a Daughters of the Goblin Wars charity event earlier this year

- The Daily Prophet, December 14

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December 15, 1996

The only similarity between Croaker and Tiberius Ogden was their stoutness, as far as Harry could tell. Where Croaker gave off a sense of bitterness, Ogden was at times as jovial as the Fat Friar. Where Croaker seemed not to have a good word for anyone, Ogden went out of his way to see the best in everyone and in every situation – even when it was a lost cause, to Harry's mind.

“You must understand the world in which Algie and I were brought up,” Ogden insisted. “If you find us backward today, imagine where things stood in the 19th century! To our eyes, Muggle-borns were ill-mannered, scruffy interlopers. They had the arrogance to think that they could be self-made men, when we surely knew better. They brought their ideas of meritocracy straight into a medieval world – madness, we thought! The difference between the magical and Muggle experiences was far greater then than is the case today, hard as that might be for you to believe. There was no question in the minds of most Muggle-borns then: they were going to drag us into modernity, and the pox upon anyone or anything that stood in the way. It was something that needed to happen... but it would have been better to take it in degrees, don't you know? We haven't come far enough, mind you – your young lady shouldn't be held back from

her full potential, but I can't deny that there is a fair chance of that." "It sounds like you've changed, so why can't he?" Harry fumed.

"Well, I've never been quite so hard-headed as Algie," Ogden laughed.

"He is that," Harry agreed.

Ogden settled heavily behind a desk littered with papers and books and scrolls nearly to the point of collapse. He was using an old classroom as a place to work – on what exactly, Harry was uncertain. After a prolonged sigh of satisfaction, the old wizard said, "Young man, I've learned a thing or two about human behaviour over the course of a very long life, and this much is true for wizard and Muggle alike: we all see what we want to see. I prefer to see the positive in life; it's not always easy, mind you, but worth the effort. Algie seeks order above all else, and he has a rather well developed viewpoint on the order of the universe in general and wizarding in particular."

"We're not exactly in fine order, what with Voldemort running about?" Harry said with a snort.

"Algie and I have seen dark wizards come and go. For him, this is part of a normal pattern in wizarding – an orderly one, if you will," Ogden returned. "That is not a view we share. This one – Voldemort – he's something altogether different. He's not acting out of some sort of ethic, some twisted sense of morality. In a way, he's like the one Flamel was pitted against.... yes, rather like Racine. This is all about him, about seizing power for its own sake. It's a game to Voldemort. In truth, I wonder how he might respond to victory; he might have no idea what to do with power if it were in his grasp."

Harry pressed to the point. "So what do I do about Professor Croaker?" he asked.

"Do? I'm not certain there's anything you can do," said Ogden. "What do you want to accomplish, young man?"

"I want him to stop treating Hermione like she's something to be scraped off his boots," Harry fired back.

“He is harsh to the poor girl, but I've not yet seen anything worthy of that description,” Ogden protested.

Harry couldn't resist adding, “She doesn't seem fond of you, either.”

Ogden steepled his hands and remained silent past the point of comfort, before he said, “I don't want to say anything hurtful, Harry, nor do I want to seem as though I don't like young Miss Granger, because that is not true. She is energized by her studies, she is insightful, she brings a perspective to magic the likes of which I've not seen or even contemplated, and she can be charming when it suits her. She might have been the greatest Slytherin of the age, if she had come from other than Muggle parentage – and that is not a criticism, it is a compliment. I am a product of Slytherin House, and I despise much of what I see in the last two generations of students.

“Algie, on the other hand, is the quintessential Ravenclaw, for good or ill. He pursues knowledge for its own sake, but he also believes that some knowledge is too dangerous for the eyes of mere wizards. He would have invented the Department of Mysteries if it hadn't already existed. A place where arcane knowledge is locked away from the eyes of all but a handful of wizards worthy of the privilege... yes, Algie couldn't help but aspire to such a place. Miss Granger – rather like myself – understands that knowledge is too often used by the powerful to control and subjugate the weak. Neither she nor I think that is anyway to achieve a just and good society. She takes it a step further, I think; she seems to believe that knowledge should be completely unregulated in order to prevent abuses. Miss Granger lacks access to most forms of power by accident of birth, you see? Thusly, the idea of being held at wand's length from knowledge... well, I imagine that is quite an affront to her sensibilities.”

“And you – what do you think?” Harry asked.

Ogden said, “With regard to knowledge? I agree with Algie that some knowledge is indeed dangerous. I disagree with him that there is some special standard of worthiness. You're being tutored by a number of very capable wizards, Harry. They teach you by building upon what you already know. They expose you to complex spell work

piece by piece, and stagger that complexity by subject. In doing this, they prepare you for more advanced work. It wouldn't be right to start a first year in the seventh year curriculum, would it? This should be no different for Miss Granger's independent studies. She needs to learn enough in the way of fundamentals to safely take on some of the magic she's exploring. Highly advanced magic can pose any number of dangers... from spell backfire to chaotic discharge to... well, the oldest of magics often levy permanent changes on those who attempt to use them. It happened to us – the thirteen of us who faced Grindelwald in the end – and it could happen to your friend if she should proceed without a care. At this point in her development, she is rather like a firstie who has decided to sit for her NEWTs. She hasn't yet mastered the foundations for the knowledge she seeks. Can you understand why I have asked that she measure her pace?"

Harry nodded and said, "Thank you for that. Have you explained all of this to her?"

"I have tried," Ogden said; "For her sake, I will continue to try. Perhaps Algie and I should separate our tuition? I'll discuss that with Brian."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Er... who is Brian?"

Ogden looked startled for a moment and then began to chuckle. "Oh, dear... well... ehh... the truth is that Albus didn't care for his name as a young man, so he went by one of his lesser names instead. I didn't know his given name was Albus until he sat for his NEWT examinations, and he was quite well known during his school days. If Martha – Martha was his wife, you see – if she hadn't said that she actually liked his name... well, I dare say that Brian Dumbledore would be the Headmaster of Hogwarts," he said.

"Oh, that's brilliant," Harry said with a smirk.

Ogden said quickly, "You didn't hear it from me. If it should come up, I trust you'll blame Algie?"

"That's more than a little Slytherin of you, isn't it?" Harry snorted.



A smile spread across Ogden's face. "I do have my moments," he said.

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December 17, 1996

Harry was on his way from the staff reading room in the Library to a late meal in his quarters, when Anthony Goldstein stopped him in the corridor.

"Do you have a few minutes?" Anthony asked.

"We can talk in my quarters, if you don't mind watching me eat," said Harry.

Anthony shook his head. "There are things you need to see," he said.

"And this important?" Harry asked.

"Very important," Anthony returned, and the look in his eyes bore testimony to that.

Harry said, "After you, then."

Anthony led him to a room in the lowest reaches of Ravenclaw's tower. They actually had to enter the tower and climb to the alcove just outside the Ravenclaw Common Room, and then take a recessed spiral staircase three levels down in order to reach it. He waved Harry back from the closed door.

"It's been re-warded. Can you take these down?" Anthony asked him.

Harry closely examined the door and its frame for runes or runic engravings. This was at the outer edge of his competency, he knew, but he decided to make the attempt. Anthony seemed to be playing it straight with him, and the Ravenclaw's seriousness on the matter was palpable. He found a tiny rune set just to one side of the door handle.

"This is Hermione's," he said automatically.

"Have you seen this before?" Anthony asked.

"No... I just know it's hers," said Harry.

"You're right about it," Anthony admitted; "She's been using this as a workroom."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why do you know that?"

Anthony said, "She's been behaving strangely - very strangely. Surely you've noticed? Frankly, I was wondering if she was under some sort of compulsion. Look... the muggle-borns have been meeting regularly. They've kept it close so far, but you must understand why they're concerned? I've fallen in with them, because I'm concerned about the same things..." He stopped for a moment, as though he was saying too much.

"You're from Golders Green, right? Hasn't your family been magical for a long time?" Harry asked.

Anthony's eyes darkened. "The purebloods around here don't care about my heritage. My mother's family have been stewards of magic for twenty-eight centuries, Harry. They were mages when Warrington's forebears lived in rude huts and had no written language. But to them, we're blood-traitors at best and sub-human at worst. They can't tolerate the idea that we put our faith in something - in someone - greater than ourselves and our own magic. They're arrogant enough to believe that somehow we make our own magic, that it wouldn't exist without us - can you imagine? We're nothing to those people. My father wouldn't bow to them and they slaughtered him - they slaughtered him, Harry - like he was a bit of common livestock -"

Harry choked out, "Slaughtered...? When did this happen? I mean... your family? Is the rest of your family all right? Do you need anything, is there anything I can do...?"

Anthony sagged. He said, "It happened while we were on the Express, on our way home at the end of last year. My mother is living

with my aunt and her family now. My brother is running the family business, and I've been taking care of the rest of our interests. I... I appreciate your concern, Harry, truly I do. I suppose you would understand, wouldn't you? You understand this sort of thing, what has to be done to set things right?"

"This is why you've been so serious about the Defence Club, isn't it?" Harry asked.

Anthony nodded. "Never again," he said.

"You're right, I do understand that," Harry said, and then asked, "So how does Hermione fit into this?"

"Right, right... so the muggle-borns have been meeting, and that means I've seen her weekly for quite some time. She's changed. It's hard to put my finger on it, or to give you a specific instance, but I've found it worrisome," Anthony said.

"She has changed," Harry admitted.

"Anyway, I noticed that she was in the area of our Common Room regularly, but then she would disappear. It was more than passing strange... and I freely admit that we Ravenclaws are a curious lot. That's when I discovered this room," Anthony said. "Yesterday, I saw her at the spiral stairs and decided to ask her about all of this. When I reached here, she was nowhere to be found but the door was open. I... well... you really need to see this."

"I'm not keen on breaking into her workspace," Harry objected.

Anthony frowned. "I'd rather it be you than Professor Flitwick or the Headmaster, truthfully. This had to be reported to the staff, and I'm not exaggerating. If it was anyone other than Hermione, and if you weren't involved with her... this really needed to be reported, Harry. It's for her own good."

Harry let out a frustrated sigh and returned his attention to the rune set. "There's something similar to a Notice-Me-Not... and an alarm...

and... all right, that would hurt... I think the best bet is to just overpower them and then recharge the runes afterward."

Anthony's brows rose. "You can do that?" he asked.

Harry shrugged and said, "I don't see why not. Wards are all about intent, really. She wanted to protect the room, of course, but she wouldn't set out to hurt me or anyone else who cares about her. On the other hand, she'd probably burn Croaker to ash."

Anthony said with surprise, "Really? He's a prickly fellow, but obviously well qualified."

"Talk to him about blood sometime, and then tell me what you think of him," Harry shot back.

"I'll have to do that," Anthony said, with noticeably less warmth in his voice.

Harry returned to the warding on the door. "My point is that the wards probably aren't intended to kill or even hurt me in particular. In turn, my only intent is to make sure that Hermione's safe. I don't care to interfere with what she's doing unless that can't be helped. Another thing in my favor is that I can tell these are hers. If I recharge them afterward, I can make them just like hers because I understand her intent."

"Er... I can't say I've ever heard warding explained in that way..." Anthony said hesitantly.

"Spend a few days with an Icelandic war witch sometime - it's enlightening," Harry threw out, as he touched his wand to the rune set. A sharp tingling shot up his arm and then down to his feet. It was as though energy drained from the door, through him and into the stone floor. The door opened with an audible click.

Most of the room was taken up by bookshelves and cabinets, brimming with papers and scrolls and tomes. A small potions work station sat in one corner, surrounded by ingredient binds and a few things that Harry couldn't identify nor did he care to. A table sat in the

middle of the chaos, loaded to near-breaking with books that sat in a semi-circle around a stack of parchment, an inkwell and quill, a goblet filled with biros and three Muggle notebooks.

Anthony drew Harry immediately to the table. "See? See? Look at some of this stuff! De Praestigiis Daemonum... the Steganographia of Trithemius... Le Veritable Dragon Rouge... München Handbuch der Magie der Dämonen! She has the Munich Manual of Demonic Magic, by all that's holy!"

"That sounds bad," Harry acknowledged.

"Bad? It's more than bad. You don't know what these are, do you? These didn't come from the Restricted Section, I can tell you. Le Veritable Dragon Rouge... The True Red Dragon... that's for summoning a demon. Have you ever heard of 'making a deal with the devil'? You'll find the instructions in there. Vodou practitioners swear by it," Anthony explained. "And this one, this is the Codex Gigas, the Devil's Bible! If you look at the illuminated letters - the big, fancy capital letters - they're full of magical text. It's Transitus Fluvii, and even some Muggles know what that is. Don't look too closely, though, unless you like to be possessed. The Munich Manual... that one's outright illegal. And these are some of the more pedestrian things in here."

He led Harry to a nearby shelf. "This is the Ghayat al-Hakim fi'l-sihr. Non-believers call it the Picatrix. We use this in our... um... well, it's enough to say that we use it. The thing is, we have two millenia of experience with this sort of thing. If you were to mess about with some of the rituals in here without applying the proper magical seals - seals which require more than simple instructions to properly apply - I don't want to think about it. All of the ones on this shelf... and about half of the books on the table... are alchemical tomes. The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage... The Black Pullet... this is some of Flamel's work, and I don't think it's of the published sort. Harry, she's mucking about with alchemy. Does this look supervised to you? It doesn't look supervised to me."

Finally, he held up a book teetering on the edge of the table. "And this... we call this one the Lesser Key of Solomon. The few wizards

who would recognize it would call it the Lemegeton. This is all about spirit evocation. This first section, it tells you how to make a brass container that will hold an evoked spirit in place. And in the fourth section... that's about how to make an almadel, so you don't just evoke spirits but conjure them instead! Harry, there's enough stuff in here to send Hermione to Azkaban for two or three lifetimes, but set that aside for a minute - "

"Set it aside?!" Harry snapped.

"Even if that wasn't an issue, there's enough stuff in here to get her killed or worse," Anthony said. "If she's doing this on her own, someone has to stop her. If someone's helping her do this, then they've earned a visit from the Aurors - but If you ask me, it should be from the Hit Wizards."

"What in hell is she doing with all of this?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Are you going to deal with this, or not?" Anthony demanded.

Harry debated over what to say. Finally he offered, "Hermione is working with the Headmaster on a really serious project. Even I don't know everything about it, but I do suspect that it could be dangerous. It's possible - and I'm not making excuses - but it is possible that she has these books for a reason."

Anthony said sharply, "I love books, Harry. I love learning; I love knowledge for the sake of knowing. I can tell you, though, that some things shouldn't be known. Other things shouldn't be known unless you're completely prepared to know them. Still more things shouldn't be known unless you're completely prepared to put them to use. It's dangerous to even read some of these books, let alone use any of the contents."

"And why do you know so much about them, then?" Harry returned.

"Remember: two millenia of experience. Some of this is only safe if you believe what's contained inside, and I mean if you truly believe it and are committed to not merely using it but protecting it. Do you know the story of Pandora's box? Actually, it would have been a clay

jar... but that's not the point. The point is, you're standing inside the box right now. If Hermione opens this box on her own, she won't be the only one to suffer."

"I'll talk to her. I'll talk to Professor Dumbledore," Harry said.

"I'll hold you to that. Do it before the Yule break is over, or I'll go to him myself," Anthony promised.

\* \* \* \* \*

December 18, 1996

Harry stayed at least twenty paces behind Hermione as she made her way through the castle. He was Disillusioned, his footsteps were silent, his scent was masked, and his Invisibility Cloak was at hand in the event that all else failed. It hadn't been easy to free his entire day - Detheridge was going to make him pay for it in a hundred small ways, he knew - but he had to know what she was doing.

She made for the Ravenclaw tower, but then turned down a little-used corridor and onto stairs that Harry had never before used. He strayed behind even further in hopes that she wouldn't spot his footprints in the dust. The stairs ended somewhere beyond Dungeon Seven, deep in the bowels of Hogwarts. She turned to the right and shortly stopped to knock on a nondescript door. He heard a ragged cough from the other side of the door. It opened to reveal the last person Harry expected to see.

"Granger," Severus Snape said evenly.

"Mr. Snape," Hermione returned.

"Your services are no longer required," said Snape.

Hermione said, "You're welcome."

"It is... true that I have benefitted from your efforts," Snape barely acknowledged.

Hermione barely reacted to him; instead, she said, "This isn't about my services. It's about yours."

"You are most persistent. In other circumstances, I would bring a quick end to your persistence," Snape said in the cold tone that Harry knew so well.

"Yes, well, you've really no choice in the matter," said Hermione.

Snape gave her a haughty look and said, "Less and less a Gryffindor each day, aren't you?"

"And you've no reason to care about that anymore," Hermione fired back.

"Touche, Miss Granger. One hundred points to perfidy," Snape said in his silkiest tone.

"Whose perfidy: yours or mine?" Hermione asked.

"That was reminiscent of wit," came Snape's reply; "Fetch my bag, then. We shall use Dungeon Nine today." He then broke into a hacking cough.

"Have you run out of potion?" Hermione asked.

"I am quite capable of making my own," said Snape.

Hermione pursed her lips and said, "I see... and you're hands aren't shaking anymore, is that correct?"

"Fine - eight more doses, then, and you will reduce the lacewings over a medium flame, not a high flame. It should have been you who noticed the difference in quality, and not me," Snape hissed.

"You're welcome," Hermione said once again.

"There are limits to my obligation - you do realise that?" Snape grumbled.



"I'll gladly let you know when we bump up against them," Hermione said; "Do you need an arm?"

"Yes, I require your assistance - does that satisfy you?" roared Snape.

"Honestly, no, it doesn't. I'd prefer that you were well," said Hermione.

"And alas, the Gryffindor returns... or is it the Hufflepuff?" sneered Snape.

Hermione took Snape's arm and led him into the corridor, where Harry had his first clear look at his old classroom nemesis. He was pale and stooped, and one of his hands constantly shook. His eyes were rheumy and his robes appeared quite loose. His gait was unsteady and it seemed as if his bravado diminished with each step. After two hundred paces, Hermione had her shoulder beneath Snape's armpit to brace him, although he stubbornly continued to walk. He leant against the wall at the entrance to Dungeon Nine and breathed heavily.

"I'll finish the potion this afternoon," Hermione said. "You're not still overdosing with Pepper-Up, are you?"

"As if I'd tell you, Granger," Snape tried to sneer, but another fit of coughing seized him.

"You'd better not die until June," Hermione said.

Snape laughed, and Harry could barely keep his feet with the shock of it. "Your warmth overwhelms me. Yes... a Hufflepuff to the core," he managed between coughs.

"Shall we?" Hermione asked.

"I trust your Sectumsempra curse will at last meet my expectations?" Snape retorted.

"It exceeded that Death Eater's expectations at the Goblin Hunt," said Hermione darkly.

"Nonetheless, I have yet to see tangible evidence," Snape insisted. The door to Dungeon Nine closed with a loud squelch before Harry heard her reply.

Harry collapsed against the corridor wall. He was still virtually paralyzed when Hermione and Snape exited the dungeon nearly two hours later. The two exchanged words as Snape stumbled back to his chambers under Hermione's care, but Harry didn't take any of it in. He recovered enough to follow her back toward Ravenclaw's tower and down the spiral stairs.

Hermione stopped at the warded door and let out a long sigh. She said aloud, "I imagine there's an even chance you're here, Harry. I know you took down my warding and put it back again. It was well done, but I know it's your ward. It just feels that way. If you're here, then we may as well have a talk. If not... then I'm talking to myself."

Harry allowed himself to reappear. "Why?" he asked flatly.

"That's my question, isn't it? Why did you break into my workroom? Why did you find it in the first place? Why are you here now?" Hermione fired back.

"Why are you studying with Snape?" Harry growled.

"You've been following me," Hermione said coldly.

"I shouldn't need to do it, but there you are," said Harry.

Hermione moved her wand in a complex sequence and the workroom door briefly shone with a bluish light. "Come in, then. Obviously you know where to take a seat," she said.

They sat at the table and stared at each other for a long while after the door once again sealed. Hermione broke the silence. "I found Snape lying in a dungeon corridor, in a pool of his own vomit," she said; "Dumbledore did nothing! You did nothing! You cut the man off from an addictive potion and then you left him alone. Don't you dare to lecture me about what I've done for him!"

Harry was again stunned. "I... uh..."

Hermione said quickly and angrily, "Don't make excuses to me, because the whole thing is inexcusable. Dumbledore deserves most of the blame - and yes, it's Dumbledore, not Professor Dumbledore, not Headmaster Dumbledore. I was fool enough to think that he actually cared about me, but not anymore. Snape is one of the more vile people I've ever met, but Dumbledore discarded him like a Chocolate Frog wrapper when it suited him. I asked Madam Pomfrey for help, and she told me that her instructions were to leave Snape to his own devices, as he was no longer a member of staff. She did end up providing me with ingredients, but I think that was just a means to satisfy her Healer's Oath. I chose to keep you clear of this, because you would have no desire to help him and because there's nothing you could possibly say to justify the situation - nothing."

Harry crossed his arms. "You're right, I wouldn't go out of my way to help him," he said; "Snape's a right bastard, and I'm not all that sorry he's suffering. With that said, do you really think I would have left him in his own spew? Look, it never occurred to me that he'd need any help. If the Headmaster left him that way on purpose, then you're right: there's no excuse for it."

"All right, that's a start -" Hermione began.

Harry cut her off, "Now, then: why are you letting that, that thing teach you curses? Why are you reading these books? Are you casting anything from these? I know what they are."

"Who came with you?" Hermione asked.

"Who says anyone did?" Harry snapped.

"You wouldn't know any of these books," she said confidently.

"Well, thanks for that!" Harry groused.

"Almost no one could identify more than one or two of the books on this table," Hermione returned. "Who came here? It wasn't Dumbledore, or I'd already have been in his office. Was it Croaker?"

Harry said immediately, "No! Croaker's an arse - I'd never involve him in something like this! He'd probably be thrilled to have you arrested."

Hermione nodded and said, "You spoke to him, then?"

"I talked to Ogden, too," Harry told her. "I think he's trying to do right by you; he made some good points. Croaker, though... Merlin! I wanted to choke the life out of him!"

"We agree on something, at least. That's good, isn't it?" Hermione said.

Harry returned to the topic at hand. "These books are dangerous," he said.

"Many of them are," she admitted. "I'm only using three of them, if that helps you. The rest are references."

"I'm told that some of them are even dangerous to read," he said to her.

She rolled her eyes and said, "Most of those tales are myths."

"Who told you that?" Harry asked.

"It's so obvious; anyone could see through the inconsistencies," she assured him.

Harry was far from convinced. "Are you certain?" he asked.

"There's very little risk," she answered.

Harry picked up The Lesser Key of Solomon and asked her, "Spirit conjuring?"

He set it down and then picked up The Black Pullet. "Alchemy? Didn't Lucia muck about with alchemy on her own?"

He replaced that with the Codex Gigas. "Are you planning to make a deal with the devil?" he asked her.

"There is no such thing," she said flatly.

He repeated his earlier question: "Are you certain?"

"I don't need to be, because I'd never even consider a ritual like that," she answered.

He sat back in his chair. "Back to it, then. Why?" he asked.

"It's to confirm my work... well, that's what most of it is for," she told him. "I have the answer, I think. I know what happened in 1981."

"You know...? You think you've figured it out?" Harry spluttered.

"I'm almost certain of it," Hermione said.

"I need you to be safe," he said.

"I'm cautious," she said.

"Bill Weasley had to fix your arm in the Black Library," he pointed out.

"I'm more cautious now," she said.

"The person who came with me... he'll turn you in if he isn't convinced that you're putting a stop to this," he said.

"That's none of his affair," she sniffed.

"He thinks it is," he countered.

"Most of these aren't mine," she said; "Most are to be returned before the Yule break."

"Good," he said. "Where did they come from?"

"That's really not any of your affair," she said.

"It is my affair if you're putting yourself in danger. I work here, Hermione," he reminded her.

"You're the one crashing wards by overpowering them, and you think I'm in danger?" she responded.

"Stop training with Snape," he said.

"You don't own me," she returned dangerously.

"It's no good for you," he said.

"I'll be done soon. He's already turning me over to a duelling partner," she said.

"You're taking his advice on a duelling partner?" he asked.

"It was good advice," she said; "Stop training with the war witch."

"I have to do it," he said.

"It's no good for you," she said.

"It's not the same thing," he complained.

"So you say," she allowed.

He took a slow breath and then said, "This is getting us nowhere."

"You're right," she agreed; "What do we do now?"

"We find a way to trust each other?" he offered.

"I'll return most of the books," she said.

"Er... I won't break into your workroom?" he ventured.

"You're right - you won't," she growled.

"I won't follow you around?" he said.

"That's a start," she said.

"Uh... I'll rub your feet while you revise?" he said.

"Hmm... that's a reasonable offer," she said with a smirk.

"It's dark in here. Let's go somewhere with some light," he said, and she agreed. It wasn't settled, but there was a measure of peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

December 20, 1996

"Come in, Monsieur Potter, come in!" the Marquis said brightly.

"Thank you," Harry said; "Erm... this is a nice office."

The Marquis gave a Gallic shrug. "It suits me," he said.

'Nice' was an understatement. 'Opulent' was closer to the truth. There was no doubt that the Marquis had expensive taste, and Harry knew through the castle grapevine that the Marquis had rejected nearly every furnishing Hogwarts had to offer. Virtually the entire contents of the south tower were ultimately transported from the Marquis' chateau.

"Did you need something from me?" Harry asked.

"Non, Monsieur Potter. It is you who need something from me," the Marquis announced. "Mme. de Flandres, please join us."

The Marquis' apprentice joined them in the office. Harry had for the most part avoided her since making a referral to Mr. Tonks. She was too forward for his taste, and he was still unsure whether she was purely interested in a business partnership. Once seated, she remained silent.

"I have asked M. Potter here today so that he may learn of the, ehh, travails of the hero," said the Marquis. "Apprentice, what is it that the heroes have in common? I speak of those who have come in the times since my birth."

"Each of them had a group of close supporters, Your Grace," Mme. deFlandres said immediately.

"Quite so, quite so - well spoken," the Marquis said. "M. Potter, it is Albus' group that you have met: the ones you have named the, ehh, 'old-old crowd', yes? Some of these were of my group before that, as I was of Nicolas' group before that. Apprentice, what is my age?"

"Two hundred and forty-one years, Your Grace," she answered.

"Yes, yes... two hundred and forty-one years. You will not speak of this, M. Potter. Some think me to be three, four, even five years younger than this, and I am grateful for the illusion of youth," the Marquis said; Harry had to stifle a chuckle. He went on, "I was born two years to the day before my cousin Marie-Joseph. He is a rather well-known fellow in his own right, for the Muggles in America. They know him as the Marquis de Lafayette. Why do I say these things, you are asking, yes? It is because of this: it will not be Albus who wins the war that is coming. It will not be this 'old-old crowd' that tries to train you, even in the face of the curse. Alas, it will not be me, though I would gladly suffer the victory, and the riches and fine women and fine cognac that would come my way. It will be you, M. Potter, and it will be your companions. Some will be older, some will be of the same age as yourself. For another hero, some would be younger, but when one is as young as you, then not so much."

"That does make sense," Harry admitted.

"Of course it does; I would not tell you this if it were otherwise," said the Marquis. "And thus, it is time that the hero begins to assemble his group. The rules, Apprentice?"

Mme. de Flandres hesitated for a moment before she asked, "The rules, Your Grace?"



The Marquis huffed, "Yes, of course: the rules. The rules by which the hero, he forms the successful group - those rules?"

"Are you referring to the Rule of Thirteen, Your Grace?" she asked.

"Among others, yes," the Marquis said. He turned to Harry and explained, "Your group - your, ehh, team, if you like - should consist of yourself and twelve others. There is to be thirteen in total, not twelve and not fourteen, but thirteen. You will see this again and again and again in the history. Even the Muggles have the best and biggest example, you know? The Christ, he had the Twelve, yes? Not the first to do this, and not the last. Continue, Apprentice."

Mme. de Flandres said quickly, "Yes, Your Grace. The twelve should be sworn to service in an order determined by lot, such that neither they nor you know the order in which the oaths are sworn. The last to swear is the most likely to either die in your service or to commit betrayal, but many believe that this is self-fulfilling. Therefore, it is best that the order remains unknown to all."

The Marquis nodded approvingly. "Well stated, Apprentice," he said. "The team - the, ehh, order, if you like - she must be sworn around the common object... the ring, the pendant, the watch... the sword is nice, yes? And then there is the name - the name, she is very important. She must be fitting, she must be strong, she must be noble. In this modern age, I am told that she must fit on the, ehh... what is the word? The, ehh, tee-shirt - she must fit on the tee-shirt." Harry couldn't hold back a snort on that, and even Mme. de Flandres' expression broke for a moment.

"Enough of the humour. Apprentice, bring forth the cases, would you?" the Marquis ordered. Mme. de Flandres briefly left the room and then returned with thirteen long cases levitating three feet above the floor.

Harry put it together quickly. "Swords, sir?" he asked.

"Quite so, M. Potter," said the Marquis. "Kanzan, he will not return to this place. In his stead, he offers these to you. You will find thirteen identical blades, engraved with the sign of House Potter and the sign

of Hogwarts and the sign of Britain. These shall be the common object for your, eh, order."

Harry cautiously opened one of the boxes. "It's brilliant," he said quietly.

Mme. de Flandres stood and asked, "May I?" Harry put the blade in her hands. She gave a few slices and then slid fluidly into a duelling pose.

"Your impressions, Apprentice?" the Marquis asked.

"The grip is supple and the weight is superb, Your Grace. They are subtly but powerfully charmed," she said. "These are remarkable blades. Anyone would be honored to bear them."

"Kanzan, he is the greatest living craftsman of the blade," said the Marquis; "I would expect nothing less. He took these from the metal rods to the magical blades by his own hand and wand, M. Potter. These were not left to the journeyman or the apprentices."

"How can I ever pay for these? I can't even imagine the value..." Harry wondered aloud.

"There is no paying," the Marquis told him. "The payment, it is to rid the world of this Voldemort of yours. The name, she is what remains before us. She must be noble, she must be worthy of a chevalier such as M. Weasley, and she must be worthy of the clothing, yes? And so, I, Alexandre, the Marquis de Maupassant, shall grace you with the perfect name, the name that will forever mark your, eh, noble order in the annals of the history. Les Chevaliers de Saint-Pierre, this is the name."

Harry felt run over. He managed to say, "I appreciate, erm, what you're doing... Les Chevaliers de... I'm sorry?"

Mme. de Flandres explained, "The Marquis says this in French, of course. The name which he has provided you is said in English as 'The Knights of Saint Peter'."

"So you've been calling Ron a knight?" Harry asked.

"This is correct, M. Potter. M. Weasley, his place is to be the hero's knight," said the Marquis. "It goes without saying that M. Weasley will be a part of your order."

"And Hermione, of course," Harry added.

"Non, non. Mme. Granger, she will not be such," the Marquis pronounced.

Harry's eyes widened. "Pardon?" he asked.

"Ahh, this is not to say that Mme. Granger is unimportant, not at all. The goblins, they have already spoken on her place. Sataaja, they said to us all. Mme. Granger, she is your guide. She is, ehh, soror mystica for your noble quest," the Marquis clarified. "In this way, she is more important than this order you will swear to your service. That which is between you and she, this is already sworn, yes?"

"I suppose it is," Harry said quietly.

"So, it is finished, yes? We have the number, we have the blades, we have the name, and we have the first chevalier," the Marquis said with great satisfaction.

"Er... not that I'm ungrateful... because certainly I'm not..." Harry began.

"Ahh, yes. My Apprentice, she is of course at your service, Her skill with the blade, it is legendary. Her mind, it is in the same realm as the sataaja. Her courage, it is that of the chevalier," the Marquis declared.

"It would be an honour, Your Grace," Mme. de Flandres said immediately.

"Eh... that's... that's great. I'll... once all this is organised, we can speak about that..." Harry managed.

"You were breathless with the question, M. Potter - please continue with the thought," the Marquis said.

"Oh, right, yes... uh... about the Knights of Saint Peter? What's behind that name, exactly? I'm afraid I don't follow," said Harry.

The Marquis nodded knowingly and said, "I see, of course... the hero, he must know the whys and wherefores of the name, for it is part of the heroic tale, yes? The Knights of Saint George, they have a history in your country, and the Saint George, he is the patron saint. This means no for the Saint George. The Saint Patrick, this would be a possibility if you were of Ireland but you are not. The Welsh names, they do not flow from the tongue, so even though the hero's family lived in Wales... no. But then there is the holy Saint Peter. He is the first saint, the most important, the right hand of the Christ. He speaks of power, yes? But... but...! He is also the patron saint, yes? Saint Peter, he is the patron saint of many, many things. The thing that makes sense, though...? The thing that gives us the noble name? Saint Peter, he is the patron saint of potters. Thus the name, she is settled."

"Patron saint of Potters... that's great... brilliant, actually... er... can't tell you how much help this has been... eh..." Harry babbled.

The Marquis grinned madly. "It comes naturally to me," he said. "Now is the time when we toast with the cognac and tell the stories of the oats we have sown..."

Harry went from rattled to positively uncomfortable. "Erm... oats? Does that mean...?"

The Marquis' eyes widened. "Ehh, let us step back from that! It is easy for me to forget your young age. You have not sown the oats. Perhaps you have not found the oats, although you have found the sataaja, and thus the oats are close at hand... unless you seek different oats entirely..."

"Perhaps another line of conversation is in order, Your Grace?" Mme. de Flandres ventured.

The Marquis raised one eyebrow. "But of course... oh, my. How shall I say... M. Potter, it is possible that the sataaja, she is not the right sort of oats?"

"I'm really confused about the oats..." Harry offered.

The Marquis stared intently at Harry and asked, "You are not the, eh... pederaste? Not that I sit in judgment, of course -"

"Your Grace!" Mme. de Flandres squeaked.

Harry sat back in his chair, alarmed. "You're not asking...?"

"M. Potter favours women," Mme. de Flandres said without hesitation.

Harry stood quickly and shook the Marquis' hand. "Thank you for all the advice. The swords are great. I'll remember the rules and I'll think on the name. Have a wonderful day," he blurted out in a single breath, and then left the office as quickly as possible.

Ron stopped him in the corridor, which he was moving through as quickly as possible without running. "What's happened? You're pale as Sir Nick!" he said.

"Met with the Marquis - he thinks you're a knight - gave us some swords - wants us to start an order - I gotta go," Harry bit out.

"Swords are cool," Ron said to Harry's retreating back.

\* \* \* \* \*

December 22, 1996

Long after the usual gaggle of visitors faded away, the packet from Ted Tonks still sat on Harry's desk. Every time that he walked away from it, Hedwig let out a sharp cry and fixed him with an unforgiving stare. The fact that Mr. Tonks had sent a packet at all left open the possibility that Croaker had been right: that Harry was under some sort of marriage contract, or betrothal, or whatever it was actually

called by wizards. Not for the first time, Harry recognized how little he truly knew about the world in which he lived.

He barely noticed when the tray holding his half-eaten dinner disappeared, nor did he hear Spat return until there was a firm tug on his sleeve. "Not-Professor Potter needs something more potent than his usual butterbeer...?" the house-elf said.

"Why would you think that?" Harry asked.

Spat immediately answered, "The Not-Professor is not his usual crabby, growly and easily annoyed self."

"Charming," Harry said with a grimace.

Spat put on an expression that passed for a smirk, and remarked, "The Not-Professor still puts up with Spat despite Spat's constant offenses. Spat thinks that the Not-Professor is the only wizard strange enough for Spat's liking. Spat also thinks the Not-Professor is afraid of the papers on his desk. Spat asked the Taimmainen what to do for the Not-Professor, and the Taimmainen reminded Spat that the Not-Professor is the head of House Black. This means the Not-Professor is the rightful owner of all the things that Professor Nasty Portrait packed away."

Harry let out a sharp laugh. "Professor Nasty Portrait? Do you mean Phineas Black?"

Spat nodded furiously. "Spat means the very same, and so Spat brings you Professor Nasty Portrait's hidden refreshment." With a flourish, he made a very dusty bottle and a glass pop onto the desk.

"What is this?" Harry wondered as he brushed at the dust.

"Spat presents a bottle of Dunwoody Single-Malt Firewhiskey from the year 1832," Spat said. "The Taimmainen told Spat that this would strip paint from the Not-Professor's insides." His big eyes opened wide, and he added hesitantly, "Has the Not-Professor been eating paint? Is this why the Not-Professor picks over his meals?"

Harry said, "It's just an expression. Er... this isn't the first time I've heard about the Taimmainen. Who is that, anyway?"

Spat began, "The Taimmainen is the One-Who-Leads-From-Behind. One must lead, there has to be one who leads, but..." He broke into fidgeting, but went on, "To lead, the Taimmainen must lead. It is... difficult for us... there are those who... some think that only one who is not right in the head would be Taimmainen."

"And what do you think?" Harry asked.

"Spat thinks that it would be an honour to serve as Taimmainen. Other house-elves think that this proves their point. Spat's clan thinks that Spat spends too much time serving the Taimmainen. Spat's mother thinks that Spat is young and stupid and going through a phase of thinking he is greater than his station," the house-elf returned.

"Well, Harry Potter thinks that Spat's all right, for what it's worth," Harry said.

Spat bowed with a flourish and said, "Spat is pleased to serve the head of the great Houses of Potter and Black. Spat has decided that Not-Professor Potter is to become a great and barmy wizard like the Headmaster. Spat is ceasing hostilities with the Not-Professor's Miss Hermione Jean Granger. Miss Hermione Jean Granger treats Spat well, though Spat has made himself undeserving."

"That's, erm... gracious of you," Harry said, and then he asked, "If I ask a favour of you, Spat, are you allowed to give it?"

Spat's brow crinkled. "Spat's place is to serve the Not-Professor in all things that do no harm to Hogwarts and do not stand against the orders of the Headmaster or Taimmainen. Spat does not need to give favours, and Not-Professor does not need to ask them of Spat."

Harry nodded in understanding. He said, "Three things, then. First, this Not-Professor business has to stop; my name is Harry. Second, if you're really finished with your row, then you should refer to Hermione by name as well. Third... I need you to keep watch over

her. There are some people who think she's dabbling in some magic that's best left alone. I need to know if she's doing anything dangerous. Be sure that she doesn't see you."

"Spat will obey within the bounds of his oaths," the house-elf replied.

"Oh – two more things?" Harry added.

"Harry Potter, sir, does like to draw things out," Spat said blandly.

"You're permitted to appear in my quarters whenever needed; I don't care if you're seen by anyone who might be visiting," said Harry.

"Spat has already gathered that," the house-elf said; "There was one more thing, Harry Potter, sir...?"

"Right, then. I'm not much for servants. Dobby thinks for himself, and Winky... well, at least she doesn't grovel. Even if you're a little irritating, I don't want you to change yourself for me. Do what you do best... though I'm not quite certain what that is," Harry said.

Spat nodded furiously, and promised, "Spat will be the house-elf he is meant to be, Harry Potter, sir. Spat's clan says that Spat is the most disagreeable house-elf at Hogwarts, and that Harry Potter's Dobby is the only one more strange. Spat assures Harry Potter, sir, that no self-respecting wizard will ever accept Spat's services."

"Er... if that's what you want...?" Harry managed.

The house-elf disappeared for an instant and then reappeared with a steaming cup of tea. He dribbled some of the firewhiskey into the cup. Harry's eyes burned from the fumes. "Spat will leave Harry Potter, sir, to quail at his scary papers," he announced as he disappeared a second time.

Harry took in a long breath, let it out slowly, and tore open the large Muggle envelope in a single go. There were at least a hundred pages of papers within. A single sheet of Ted Tonks' stationery topped the stack:



- - - - -  
Harry,

I've enclosed the information you requested, as well as your monthly statements.

The wizarding economy is going through a spot of turmoil. Apparently the Swiss gnomes decided to peg the florin to this new Muggle currency that the European Union is sorting out, but told the goblins that they were going to use the thaler as the benchmark. The goblins called a banking conference, where the nissens from Norway (they're a bit like gnomes, but never tell them that) in turn decided to ignore the Euro altogether, which broke the agreement that all the banking communities had previously negotiated. The chupacabras from Brazil (nasty business, those) crawled away from the proceedings entirely, and the zombie bankers from New Orleans apparently left behind a limb at the negotiating table. That's a tremendous insult, of course, notwithstanding the stench. Never cross the zombies, by the way, as they are the most relentless debt collectors you could possibly imagine.

The result of all this kerfuffle is that the wizarding currency markets are arse-over-teakettle. Only the Americans and our friends in Oz seem to be doing well at the moment. You'll see some losses in your principal holdings, in addition to all the approved expenses.

Your generosity is admirable – for example, making good on Diggle's dealings in St. Ebb, and the victims' fund, and the potions research you're sponsoring – but both Madam Bones and I must advise that you take a more conservative position in your financial dealings. I know this is in poor taste, but it's true that Dark Lords are bad for business. It took Britain five years or more to recover from the last war. If this currency contraction heralds the beginning of a wartime economy, then we're right to worry about your accounts.

By contrast, your Muggle holdings are doing quite well. The Ministry is encouraging Gringotts to stiffen the limitations on currency conversion, and one of my contacts believes that they may soon impose a new tariff on conversions. It is worth considering the

conversion of additional Galleons to sterling. A recurring scheduled transaction would yield the most ready cash under limitations without triggering tariffs, whether old or new.

Most of your request for information was handled by the General Recording Office at the Ministry. Modest unscheduled fees were assessed in order to guarantee confidentiality. I located the rest of the material among the various Potter family records that we have gathered and catalogued on your behalf. If you have any questions about the information, Andromeda would be the one to ask. I'll be in Hogsmeade on the weekend, and will be available to meet with you upon request regarding your accounts.

Kind regards,

Ted

- - - - -

The first thirty-seven sheets of parchment each contained a formal proposal for marriage or betrothal, extended to the Head of House Potter after the death of Harry's parents. Some names were familiar: Abbott, Bones, Brocklehurst, Bruce... Hargrove... Turpin... Vane... All of these were labelled as "decision to be made within five years of installation of a new Head of House". As he looked closer, Harry saw that more than twenty had been withdrawn by the family in question; all of those withdrawals had taken place since 1991. Some had been betrothed to others, and it occurred to Harry that perhaps these proposals were extended to several families at once. He saw one from Niall Pucey, and it took him a few moments to realise that it referred to Adrian's older sister; she had finished Hogwarts after Harry's third year. That one had been withdrawn in 1994, when she had become engaged to someone whose name Harry didn't recognise.

The next twelve sheets were labelled as "rejected by conservator on minor wizard's behalf". These names were familiar and the reason for their rejection was clear to Harry. Nott, Parkinson, Gamp... it was a Death Eaters' Who's-who list. In this instance, he was very pleased with the Headmaster's meddling.

The final sheet stopped Harry cold. He read it through a second time, and then a third:

- - - - -

On this, the Twenty-Third day of December, in the Year of Our Lord 1980,

Melisende Mhairi McIlvaine and Connor Bruce MacPhail,

Mistress of the Original Noble House of McIlvaine and her consort,

Do pledge the troth of their daughter,

Dierdre Jehanne MacPhail McIlvaine

to Harry James Potter

Son of James William Potter and Lily Evans Potter,

Head of the Most Noble and Courageous House of Potter and his consort.

Either of the betrothed may negate this agreement of their own volition and without penalty between the eleventh anniversary of the birth of Miss McIlvaine, on the Ninth of October, 1990, and the seventeenth anniversary of the birth of Master Potter, on the Thirty-First of July, 1997.

The parents of the betrothed may negate this agreement only under the terms established in the Year of Our Lord 972 by the Founding Council that predated the current Ministry for Magic. As a condition of the Agreement, House McIlvaine shall allow Miss McIlvaine to accept an invitation to attend from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry at such time as it is received, provided that Master Potter accepts same.

Should this agreement remain in force on the First of August, 1997, the betrothed shall marry within five years and shall sire an heir or

heiress within ten years of marriage. The first son borne to the betrothed shall be designated as Heir Presumptive of House Potter. The first daughter borne to the betrothed shall be designated as Heiress Presumptive of House Mcllvaine and shall bear the surname Potter-Mcllvaine. Should the marriage produce no female issue, the first son borne to the betrothed shall be designated as Heir Presumptive of House Potter and Regent of House Mcllvaine, and shall pass Heirship of House Mcllvaine to his first daughter. Should that first son produce no female issue, then the second son of the betrothed shall be named Regent, and his first daughter shall be named Heiress Presumptive. Should that second son produce no female issue, then the first son of the betrothed's first son shall be designated as Regent of House Mcllvaine, and a similar progression shall be followed until such time as a valid Heiress Presumptive of House Mcllvaine may be named.

Such monies and assets as House Mcllvaine may possess following the natural death of the Mistress shall pass to Miss Mcllvaine, excepting a designated residence and lifelong stipend for the consort of the Mistress. Fifty percent of the monies and assets shall be retained as the property of House Mcllvaine until such time as they may be passed to a valid Heiress Presumptive following the natural death of Miss Mcllvaine. Fifty percent of the monies and assets shall be provided to the betrothed to do with as they will. In the event of an unnatural death, all House Mcllvaine assets shall be frozen until the legal disposition of said death is established. All magical artifacts and the House Grimoire are designated as the property of House Mcllvaine. The lawful Head of House Potter shall always be permitted to read the Mcllvaine House Grimoire, and may practice the spells and rituals therein with the consent of the Head of House Mcllvaine at that time. This Grimoire arrangement shall be reciprocated.

House Mcllvaine and House Potter enter into a perpetual relationship upon execution of this betrothal. Each House shall work for the preservation and protection of the other; shall share or expend such assets as may be required in order to assure such preservation and protection; and shall extend protection and comfort to such Houses as each respective House may have previously joined in a reciprocal relationship.

In the event of the death of the Master of House Potter and his consort prior to the execution of this Agreement, House McIlvaine shall grant Master Potter houseroom and protection. In the event of the death of the Mistress of House McIlvaine and her consort prior to the execution of this Agreement, House Potter shall grant Miss McIlvaine houseroom and protection.

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Both of the McIlvaines and both of Harry's parents had placed their signatures and a single drop of blood at the bottom of the document. Harry traced his fingertips along first his father's signature and then his blood; he gave an involuntary shudder. An addendum was written in the remaining inch below the signatures:

- - - - -

This Betrothal Agreement is negated under the terms established by the Founding Council, on account of the death of Deirdre Jehanne MacPhail McIlvaine.

Signed on the Twenty-Second day of October, in the Year of Our Lord 1981, by

Melisende Mhairi McIlvaine

- - - - -

Mr. Tonks had clipped a half-sheet of typing paper to the back of the parchment, with a hastily scribbled note:

- - - - -

Madam McIlvaine appeared before the Wizengamot in November 1981 and offered to fulfil the Agreement made with your parents by offering houseroom, protection and a reciprocal arrangement between the houses. This was no small gesture given the history of House McIlvaine. The McIlvaines can be traced to the pre-Founders era, you see. Dumbledore informed the members that you had already been placed with Muggle relatives. I believe that this was the

first occasion at which Dumbledore publicly acknowledged your placement. One of my clients who sat on the Wizengamot at the time insists that Dumbledore referenced your parents' will in order to quell the uproar. Either Dumbledore or my client is being dishonest with me. I think it's Dumbledore, but you're well aware that I don't trust the old man.

I understand that you've already met Madam Mcllvaine, though a Board of Governors hearing was not the best sort of introduction. In our limited experience, Melisende is an honourable witch. She may be a useful ally in what is to come. I suspect she would be pleased to receive your correspondence.

TT

- - - - -

Harry had no idea what to think, what to say, what he might write in a letter, or who he would – or even could – seek out for advice. His parents had betrothed him. He could scarcely take in the idea, nor could he put it away. He recalled Madam Mcllvaine from the Board meeting, and his mind conjured up a girl his own age with long and wavy reddish-brown hair and an enigmatic smile. Deirdre Potter. It was what might have been and what could no longer be. It dawned on him that Deirdre had died in October, 1981. Harry didn't have to think long about why she might have died, or at whose hand.

Madam Mcllvaine tried to take me in, Harry thought. She could have taken me in - my parents wanted her to take me in - and he stopped it.

"Fucking Dumbledore!" he growled. He snatched up one of the wooden chairs at the table in his personal common room. He swung it hard against the stone wall and let forth a ragged shout.

"Fucking Voldemort!" he lashed out. He picked up the largest piece of the chair and gave it another swing, and then he reduced another piece to glowing ashes. He looked at a shattered chair leg and saw a hint of a red eye; in a flash, the chair leg joined the first pile of ashes.

It was one more thing he had been denied, and there was one more person who had paid the price for the snake-faced monster's misdeeds. Harry resolved two things with little effort. First, Voldemort would die by his hand, and it would be sooner rather than later. Second, he was finished with waiting for what he wanted in life. Voldemort could very well snuff out the good things in Harry's life before he even knew they existed. He certainly wasn't going to let the things in his grasp slip away. He wondered why he'd ever allowed that in the first place. The third resolution came shortly thereafter. He would ally with Dumbledore, he would even trust that the Headmaster's intentions were noble, but he would never again trust that the Headmaster was actually looking out for his interests. This was one example too many. His mind raced onward. It occurred to him that if this was true, then there was no good reason to believe the Headmaster was working in Hermione's interests either. What had Ted Tonks said once – that the Headmaster loved everyone but no one in particular? He finally understood what Mr. Tonks had meant.

“Not a chance,” Harry snarled aloud; “I won't let it happen.” The rest of the chairs at his table crumbled, and the table itself collapsed.

“Harry, what on Earth...?” Hermione gasped from the doorway. He opened his arms and she moved hesitantly toward him.

“Thank God you're here,” he mumbled into her shoulder.

She eased him back with her hands so that she could look him in the eyes. “What's happened? Are you all right? What can I do?” she asked in quick succession.

He took a ragged breath and crushed his lips to hers. She stiffened for a moment and then seemed to realise that this was Harry's answer to her question. The kiss was returned with a fervor they hadn't shared before. It was passionate and needful and on the edge of desperate.

Hermione pulled free to catch her breath. “Not that I'm complaining, not at all, but -”

“You're mine, and I'm yours,” Harry growled.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "I'm not something to be owned," she protested.

"That's not it. No one's going to take you from me, not Voldemort, not Dumbledore, not Krum -"

"Viktor?" Hermione laughed.

"Not the whole sodding Ministry," Harry said seriously.

"Harry... what...?" Hermione gently asked.

"Don't ever leave me," he said. "I won't let it happen."

"I... I'm not going anywhere..." she said.

"I'm not trying to tell you what to do, I just wanted you to be safe," he said.

"I returned the books, honestly," she said.

"I'm glad. You can't take those kind of chances," he said.

"You need to understand that I won't be controlled, Harry. I won't have it, not anymore. In doing all this research... I think I may have discovered something, something about the nature of magic itself. I'm not certain yet... it may take some time to be sure... but if I'm right, it's going to turn their whole world upside down. Croaker, Fudge, Malfoy, people like that - they'll try to stop it, but I won't let them. I won't let them stop me," she said.

"I won't let them, either -" he said.

"I know," she said.

"- and they'll have to come through me first," he finished.

"That kiss... what was that about, really?" she asked.



"It's because you're mine," he said.

"No, you're mine," she smirked.

"That's bloody well right," he grinned.

"Harry, language," she chided him.

He kissed her again, with as much need as the last.

"What do you want, Harry?" she whispered.

"You," he said.

She stammered, "I... I'm not... er..."

"What do you want?" he asked.

She buried her face in the crook of his neck and said, "More than we've had."

He took her hand, led her toward the sofa and said, "Then show me."

"Maybe we should set this aside until Christmas?" she teased him.

"Or maybe not," he said as he kissed her once more.

"Or maybe not," she agreed.

This is the last chapter that Mike [FP] finished before he got sick again. I have all of his drafts, outlines, notes, etc etc. He asked me to figure a way to put it all together so everybody who read this much has an idea of how it's supposed to end. His outline of the whole thing from beginning to end has the date January 25, 2004 on it. There are full drafts from 2004 of the last chapters. I'm going to post all of this stuff as a separate part, Part 5, so it isn't mixed up with the rest. Thanks for all the good thoughts and emails and stuff, I know Mike and the whole family appreciate it.

8-8-09

AMP

Now what?

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